

Translanguaging, Classroom Participation, and Linguistic Power in Undergraduate ESL Education: Student and Teacher Evidence from Lahore, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates translanguaging as a pedagogical and sociolinguistic resource for changing participation and power relations in undergraduate English as a Second Language classrooms in Lahore, Pakistan. In multilingual classes, a mixed-method intervention was carried out over 12–16 weeks, with regular access to Urdu, Punjabi and English. This article reports on the post-intervention perception and the classroom-power strand, using questionnaires and open-ended responses from 63 students and 63 teachers, supported by observations and interviews. Descriptive statistics were re-calculated from raw frequencies and qualitative responses were thematically coded. The highest levels of student agreement were recorded for clearer expression of ideas (93.7%), comfort in bilingual classroom use (88.9%), retention of cultural identity (87.3%), and challenging English dominance (85.7%). Teachers strongly agreed that translanguaging empowered students (93.7%), created a more inquisitive environment (87.3%), encouraged participation (85.7%), and broke down language-based hierarchy (82.5%). Qualitative findings also suggested risks of less practice with English, uneven proficiency, and expectations from institutions for English only. The study concludes that planned translanguaging can democratize access and reallocate classroom authority when it has sustained English output, explicit teacher preparation and flexible language policy.

KEYWORDS: Translanguaging, ESL, Linguistic Power, Multilingual Pedagogy, Classroom Participation, Higher Education, Lahore, Pakistan

Introduction

Pakistan's universities operate in a multilingual ecology in which Urdu, regional languages and English do not share equal social and institutional status. English is seen as a conduit to academic success, professional mobility and elite opportunity, while Urdu and languages like Punjabi are central to students' everyday meaning-making. This distribution is not simply a neutral division of linguistic labor. It has a historical relation with language ideology, access to education and distribution of symbolic power (Rahman, 2002). Similarly, a recent study of Pakistani policy and student narratives shows how multilingual competence is often divided into bounded languages, the value of which is ranked according to political and economic usefulness (Syed & Shah, 2026).

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English language education thus finds itself in a sticky middle ground. Students may study English for years with little opportunity for intended interaction. But classroom policies often reflect the exclusion of familiar languages as a mark of rigor. There are some long-standing issues around English language education in Pakistan. These include inequitable access, disparities in teacher preparation, exam-driven teaching, and an ongoing gap between formal language knowledge and communicative use (Shamim, 2008). More generally, South Asian language education has struggled to reconcile the multilingual social realities with policy models that promote the separation of languages (Canagarajah & Ashraf, 2013).

Communicative competence is the idea that learning a language is not only about being grammatically correct but about being able to use the language appropriately in social interaction (Hymes, 1972). This insight is particularly relevant in World Englishes-influenced contexts where legitimacy cannot be equated with imitation of one single idealized native-speaker norm (Kachru, 1985). Yet many undergraduate ESL classrooms continue to position English as the only legitimate language of knowledge and participation. Students who need Urdu or Punjabi to articulate a complex idea may not speak, give one-word answers, or be seen as deficient, even when they know the material. Such practices may make language proficiency a gate-keeping mechanism for classroom voice.

Translanguaging provides another way to describe multilingual communication. Translanguaging does not see bilingual speakers as mechanically shifting between autonomous language systems, but as strategically using features from an integrated repertoire (García, 2009; Otheguy et al., 2015). Code-switching continues to be a useful descriptive concept for the patterned alternation between languages (Bullock & Toribio, 2009), but a translanguaging perspective foregrounds the speaker's activity of meaning-making, identity and agency. It also allows for planned movement across languages for comprehension, collaboration, drafting, discussion and eventual performance in the target language in educational contexts (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021).

The pedagogical promise of translanguaging is not disjoint from power. Enabling multilingual resources can redistribute who can contribute, what forms of knowledge are acknowledged, and how authority is negotiated between teachers and students. It could create what Li calls a translanguaging space where multilingual speakers create identities and challenge fixed linguistic boundaries (Li, 2011). But the use of various languages is not automatically equitable. Without being planned for, familiar-language interaction may lead to less consistent practice in English, reinforce the dominance of local languages, or be a temporary bridge whose only valued destination is standard English. Thus, critical scholarship views translanguaging as a stance and design choice that calls attention to whose language practices are legitimated (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Wei & García, 2022) instead of unbounded mixing.

Empirical work to document translanguaging in higher education has begun in Pakistan. (Panezai et al., 2023) (Saleem et al., 2023) In university classrooms, multilingual interaction is used to negotiate meaning, sustain engagement, and bridge linguistic divides. However, less is known about how students and teachers view translanguaging as a challenge to English dominance and to traditional classroom hierarchy after a structured pedagogical intervention. This study tries to bridge this gap by looking at parallel evidence from undergraduate ESL students and teachers in Lahore.

Research Aims and Research Questions

The study set out to pursue four related objectives: to explore how established ESL practices construct English vis-à-vis local languages; to explore whether translanguaging changes language-based power relations; to implement a translanguaging-informed communicative framework; and to evaluate its contribution to participation, empowerment and inclusion.

The article is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do students and teachers perceive the learning and participation effects of translinguaging in undergraduate ESL classrooms?
2. To what extent do participants perceive translinguaging as challenging English dominance and deconstructing traditional classroom power relations?
3. What benefits, tensions, and implementation conditions emerge from participants' qualitative accounts?

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

From Language Separation to Integrated Repertoires

The intellectual history of translinguaging emerged from bilingual educational practices in which input and output were intentionally arranged across languages. It has since evolved into a theory of language and a pedagogical orientation (Lewis et al., 2012). Foundational accounts assume that multilingual speakers do not simply have duplicated monolingual systems, but instead they draw upon a repertoire shaped by experience, context, identity and interaction (García & Li Wei, 2014). Translinguaging is therefore both descriptive in that it accounts for how multilingual people communicate and transformative in that it challenges institutional rules which divide and rank their resources.

That is not to say that named languages are socially irrelevant. English, Urdu, and Punjabi remain meaningful categories because institutions provide opportunity and prestige through them. The point, theoretically, is that these categories should not be confused with the total architecture of a person's communicative competence. Li's practice theory conceptualises translinguaging as a process through which speakers coordinate linguistic, embodied, contextual and semiotic resources for making meaning (Li, 2018). Translinguaging is also framed by Vogel and García as a lens through which classroom practices can be designed around the learner's repertoire rather than an artificial monolingual baseline (Vogel & García, 2017).

Some examples of pedagogical translinguaging are previewing a difficult concept in a familiar language, comparing linguistic forms, discussing a problem collaboratively across languages, preparing notes bilingually, and producing a final oral or written task in English. Such sequencing is different from the unstructured use of the first language, because teachers specify a learning purpose and safeguard opportunities for target-language output. Research in bilingual classrooms suggests that strategic cross-language movement can support access to content, identity affirmation, and participation (Creese & Blackledge, 2010; Hornberger & Link, 2012). It can also enable learners to use vernacular resources as intellectual tools, rather than barriers (Sayer, 2013).

Translinguaging, Identity, and Classroom Power

Language policies are not just about vocabulary. They are also about who gets to speak authoritatively. A critical multilingual perspective asks questions about how 'appropriate' academic language is defined in ways that privilege already privileged speakers (Blackledge & Creese, 2010; Flores & Rosa, 2015). In an English-only classroom, a learner may have disciplinary insight but not have immediate access to the lexical or pragmatic resources to display it. The option of strategic multilingual mediation may dissociate conceptual competence from a momentary English performance and offer a pathway into discussion.

The redistribution of classroom voice has epistemic and interpersonal dimensions. Epistemically, students can link academic concepts with locally situated knowledge and can play with interpretations before enacting them in English. Students' repertoires are legitimate resources for peer explanation and collaborative problem-solving, with the teacher no longer the only source of linguistic authority. These shifts are linked to work that frames

translanguaging as a means of developing learner agency and creating classroom moments of recognition of multilingual identities (García & Kleyn, 2016). They are also aligned with translingual understandings of communicative norms as negotiated rather than given (Canagarajah, 2013).

But also a caution is necessary, and a critical one. Translanguaging can be adopted as a remedial scaffold that preserves the symbolic primacy of English. It can also marginalize students whose strongest language is not the common language of the majority. In Lahore, for instance, Urdu may be the lingua franca of the city, while Punjabi or other home languages are less visible. Thus, a pedagogy that is sensitive to power has to ask: what repertoires are available? Who benefits from one language choice rather than another? Do all students keep a route to participation? Translanguaging is transformative only when it expands the scope of linguistic legitimacy with the explicit English instruction students require for academic and professional purposes.

Learning, Participation, and Implementation Conditions

Research has consistently shown the strategic use of familiar languages to be associated with comprehension, metalinguistic awareness, and reduced anxiety. Cummins (2007) argues that it is educationally inefficient to exclude learners' prior linguistic knowledge as new learning is based on existing cognitive and conceptual resources. Baker also argues that bilingual education is most effective when both languages are viewed as resources for learning rather than as mutually contaminating systems (Baker, 2011). These claims support the use of translanguaging to clarify concepts, mediate between peers, and prepare students for performance in English.

The evidence base also identifies conditions that influence outcomes. Research on English-medium instruction indicates that language policy is not a guarantee for meaningful learning. Teacher competence, student preparedness, disciplinary language and availability of scaffolding are decisive (Macaro et al., 2018). Teachers need to understand the difference between "just allowing multiple languages" and "intentional cross-language activity". Research on teacher education points to the need for attention to ideology, planning for the classroom, and assessment of multilingual learning for a shift from a code-switching lens to a translanguaging stance (Goodman & Tastanbek, 2021).

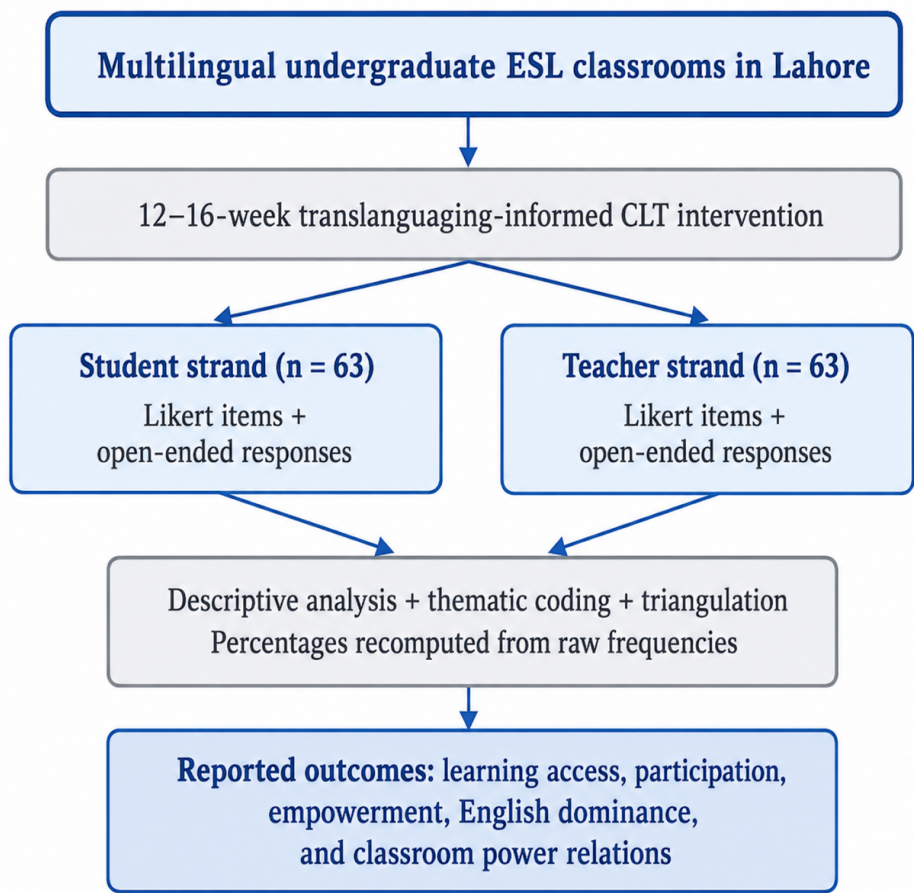
Thus, the conceptual framework of the current study is constituted of three propositions. Learners use integrated repertoires to make meaning first. Second, classroom language rules share legitimacy and participation. Third, translanguaging needs to be pedagogically structured so that multilingual access leads to, rather than displaces, sustained English use. These propositions allow the agreement of participants to be read not only as satisfaction with bilingual explanation, but also as evidence of perceived shifts in authority, inclusion and linguistic hierarchy.

Methodology

Research Design and Analytical Scope

The wider research used a mixed-method intervention design combining quantitative questionnaires with classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, focus-group discussion, and pre-/post-intervention assessment. The present article reports the post-intervention perception and classroom-power strand because it directly addresses how translanguaging was experienced by students and teachers. The analytical pathway is summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Analytical Pathway for the Perception and Classroom-Power Strand Reported in this Article



Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in selected public and private undergraduate ESL settings of Lahore. The city offers a suitable context where English has high academic and professional currency, Urdu acts as a major lingua franca, and Punjabi and other languages continue to be part of participants’ daily repertoires. The participants were selected through purposive sampling and were directly involved in the teaching of undergraduate ESL. The final sample consisted of 126 participants, 63 students and 63 teachers.

The student sample was largely Urdu-speaking and near gender balanced. Only 19.0% reported regularly speaking English at home, while 47.6% reported “somewhat” speaking English at home, and 33.3% reported not speaking English at home. The teacher group was experienced and linguistically diverse: 69.8% reported competency in more than Urdu alone and more than half had at least 11 years of teaching experience. Table 1 provides the characteristics of the participants

Table 1
Participant Characteristics

Group	Characteristic	Category	n	%
Students	Gender	Female	30	47.6
		Male	33	52.4
	Native language	Urdu	56	88.9
		Other	7	11.1

Group	Characteristic	Category	n	%
Teachers	English use at home	Yes	12	19.0
		Somewhat	30	47.6
		No	21	33.3
	English-learning duration	1–10 years	17	27.0
		11–20+ years	24	38.1
		Some years	6	9.5
		Since schooling	16	25.4
	Gender	Female	28	44.4
		Male	35	55.6
	Language profile	Urdu	19	30.2
		Urdu and English	28	44.4
		Urdu, English, and Punjabi	12	19.0
		Urdu and Punjabi	4	6.4
	Teaching experience	1–10 years	30	47.6
		11–20+ years	33	52.4
	English-teaching experience	1–10 years	29	46.0
		11–20+ years	34	54.0

Note. Each group contained 63 participants. Percentages may not total 100 because of rounding.

Instructional Intervention

We applied a translanguaging-informed communicative framework for a duration of 12–16 weeks. It combined Communicative Language Teaching and task-based activity with planned use of the students' familiar languages. Tasks included planning events, interviewing, problem-solving together, negotiating, discussing, and role-playing. Students were able to use Urdu and Punjabi to explain difficult ideas, express positions, compare language forms, support peers, and reduce anxiety as they moved toward longer English output. The framework also involved programmed interaction with proficient English users to serve as reference models for pragmatic and contextually appropriate communication.

Teachers were oriented and supported professionally on the rationale for translanguaging, designing multilingual tasks, and the importance of keeping opportunities for English production. Implementation was monitored through classroom visits, teacher feedback and observation of language use and interaction patterns. The framework viewed translanguaging as a sequence of instruction, not a free substitution of English.

Instruments and Data Collection

Demographic data, ten five-point Likert responses, and open-ended accounts were collected through parallel student and teacher questionnaires. Student items focused on comfort, learning, Participation, Explanation, Cultural Identity, Second Language Acquisition, Empowerment, Peer Interaction, English dominance, and Power Hierarchy. Teacher items included: permission to use multilingual resources, learning, participation, empowerment, inquisitiveness, proficiency gaps, instructional adaptation, critical thinking, English dominance, and hierarchy. Questionnaire patterns were contextualized and tensions in implementation identified through classroom observations and interviews.

In pilot work, questionnaire wording was reviewed for relevance and clarity. The survey was conducted after the participants had used the framework so that the survey reflected informed rather than hypothetical judgements. Participation was voluntary, and responses were anonymous during the reporting process.

Data Analysis

Likert scales: descriptive analysis. Positive endorsement was indicated by merging “agree” and “strongly agree.” For transparency, the categories of disagreement and neutral responses were kept in the tables. All percentages in this article are based on simple frequency tables, n = 63 for each group. This was done to ensure that frequencies and percentages were internally consistent. The perceptual data are not used to make any inferential claims.

Open-ended responses, interview transcripts, and field notes were analyzed using thematic coding. Initial codes captured comprehension, expression, confidence, participation, identity, English practice, language imbalance, cognitive load, institutional policy, and classroom authority. Related codes were grouped into larger themes and compared across teachers and students. Quantitative and qualitative evidence were then triangulated to identify convergence, divergence and conditions affecting implementation.

Ethical Considerations

Adult human participants were studied. Informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymous reporting were used. The declarations section ethics statement reports details of formal institutional approval.

Results

Student Perceptions of Translanguaging

Student responses were indicative of a strong endorsement of translanguaging as a resource for expression, comfort, identity and participation. The most agreed-upon was a better explanation of ideas and views (59 of 63, 93.7%). Fifty-five students (87.3%) supported the use of bilingual classroom language, and 56 students (88.9%) agreed that comfort with both languages was supported. Fifty-four students (85.7%) felt that the use of a native language challenged the dominance of English. The specific frequencies are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Student Agreement with Translanguaging Statements (n = 63)

Statement	Disagree n	Neutral n	Agree n	Agree %
Comfort using both languages	1	6	56	88.9
Native language promotes learning	5	6	52	82.5
Both languages support active participation	4	7	52	82.5
Native-language use challenges English dominance	1	8	54	85.7
Translanguaging improves explanation of ideas	1	3	59	93.7
Both languages retain cultural identity	3	5	55	87.3
Translanguaging promotes second-language acquisition	5	7	51	80.9
Both languages deconstruct traditional power structure	5	12	46	73.0
Native language creates a sense of empowerment	6	11	46	73.0
Native language increases comfort with peers	7	10	46	73.0

Note. “Disagree” combines strongly disagree and disagree; “Agree” combines agree and strongly agree. Strongly disagree was zero for every item.

The results also reveal that students did not see multilingual access and English development as opposing. The majority supported both the promotion of second language learning (80.9%) and the challenge to the dominance of English (85.7%). There was, however, less support for statements that explicitly mentioned empowerment and dismantling traditional power structures (73.0% each). This suggests that students saw immediate functional gains more readily than they articulated institutional or ideological change.

Open-ended answers helped explain this pattern. Students often described familiar language use as a means to understand difficult content, explain a position, and enter discussion with increased confidence. Meanwhile, 18 students (28.5%) warned that if discussion was mainly in the native language, it could hinder English development and reduce L2 practice. Smaller groups attributed overuse of L1 to being nervous, being distracted, or being dependent. Student support was therefore conditional: translanguaging was appreciated as mediation but not as a replacement for consistent use of English.

Teacher Perceptions and Pedagogical Practice

Teachers reported broad support for translanguaging as well, especially endorsing empowerment. The majority ($n = 59$, 93.7%) agreed that enabling students to use their linguistic repertoire was an advantage. Fifty-five (87.3%) related translanguaging to a more inquisitive environment, and 54 (85.7%) to participation. Fifty-two teachers (82.5%) agreed that translanguaging deconstructed the traditional hierarchy between English and the native language. All teacher responses are shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Teacher Agreement with Translanguaging Statements ($n = 63$)

Statement	Disagree n	Neutral n	Agree n	Agree %
Allows students to use native language and English	1	6	56	88.9
Deconstructs hierarchy between English and native language	5	6	52	82.5
Native-language use promotes learning	4	7	52	82.5
Promotes student participation	1	8	54	85.7
Empowers students to use their linguistic repertoire	1	3	59	93.7
Creates a more inquisitive environment	3	5	55	87.3
Challenges the dominance of English	5	7	51	80.9
Bridges the language-proficiency gap	5	12	46	73.0
Leads teachers to modify teaching strategies	6	11	46	73.0
Supports critical thinking	7	10	46	73.0

Note. “Disagree” combines strongly disagree and disagree; “Agree” combines agree and strongly agree. Strongly disagree was zero for every item.

Teachers’ qualitative responses suggested understanding, validation of identity, comfort, and increased willingness to answer questions. They reported the use of multilingual explanations for theoretical concepts, idioms, vocabulary, and tense distinctions. Some accounts revealed that students first tried out an interpretation in Urdu or Punjabi before rephrasing it in English, suggesting that multilingual discussion was a space for rehearsal, rather than a destination.

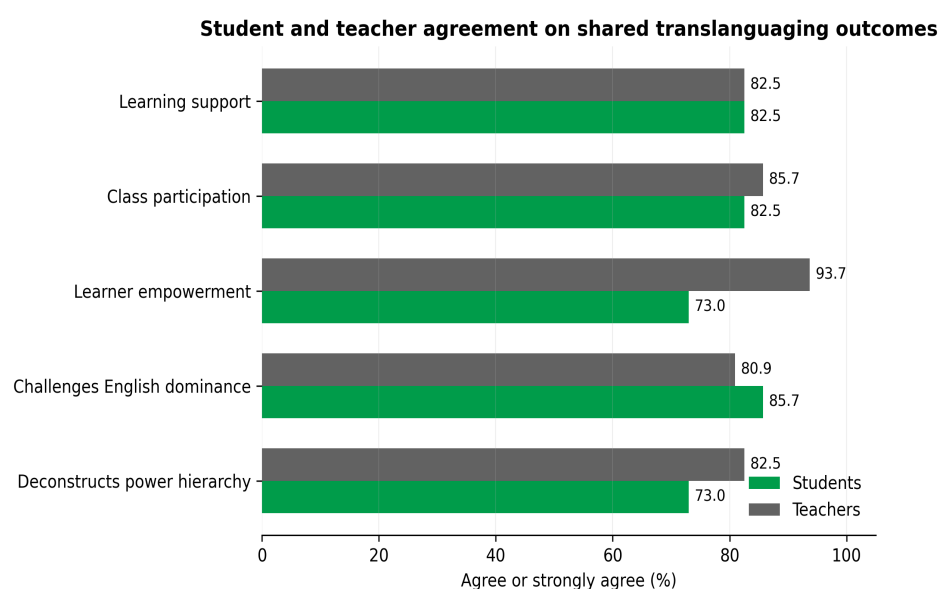
There were implementation problems, too. Seventeen teachers (27.0%) indicated uneven proficiency or language imbalance as a main challenge, and seven (11.1%) indicated the cognitive load of juggling multiple languages. Other concerns included misinterpretation, interference from other languages, large class sizes, students being too dependent on their familiar languages, and peer pressure. Two teachers (3.2%) explicitly stated English-only institutional expectations. These responses suggest that teacher approval was coupled with a desire for more clarity related to sequencing, policy support, and classroom-management strategies.

Convergence and Divergence Across Groups

As shown in Figure 2, the common elements have a high degree of overlap. 82.5% of both groups agreed that the use of native language supported learning. Teachers were slightly more positive about participation (85.7% vs 82.5%) and deconstruction of hierarchy (82.5% vs 73.0%). The largest gap was in the domain of empowerment: 93.7% of teachers approved it vs. 73.0% of students. A larger proportion of students than teachers reported that translanguageing challenged English dominance (85.7% vs. 80.9%).

Figure 2

Student and Teacher Agreement on Shared Translanguageing Outcomes



The contrast between empowerment and English dominance is analytically meaningful. Teachers may understand empowerment as an instructional effect—more response, confidence, or engagement—while students may use the term to describe a deeper shift in authority. On the other hand, students directly experience the symbolic pressure of English and are therefore more likely to be aware of instances in which multilingual participation challenges that pressure. Both groups agree on the direction of change, but differ in where it has its strongest effects.

Qualitative synthesis

Thematic analysis generated four converging themes and three implementation tensions. Table 4 combines the accounts of students and teachers, and does not consider short open-ended comments as equivalent to full interview narratives. The synthesis reveals that translanguageing most often functioned as an access mechanism, enabling participants to enter into a task, clarify a concept, and sustain interaction. Its effect on power was mediated by whether that access led to a real redistribution of voice.

Table 4

Themes, tensions, and implications emerging from qualitative evidence

Source	Theme	Observed pattern	Interpretive significance
Students and teachers	Conceptual access	Familiar-language explanation clarified difficult concepts and vocabulary.	Separates conceptual understanding from immediate English performance.
Students and teachers	Participation and confidence	Participants reported easier entry into discussion and greater willingness to contribute.	Broadens who can display knowledge and claim classroom voice.
Students	Identity and peer affiliation	Multilingual use was linked to cultural identity and comfort with peers.	Legitimizes linguistic identities that English-only rules may suppress.
Teachers	Inquisitiveness and interaction	Teachers observed more questions, peer explanation, and collaborative response.	Shifts the teacher from sole linguistic authority toward facilitator.
Students	Risk of reduced L2 practice	Excessive familiar-language discussion was seen as limiting English exposure.	Requires protected stages of extended English output.
Teachers	Uneven repertoires and management	Language imbalance, cognitive load, and large classes complicated implementation.	Requires inclusive grouping, explicit routines, and differentiated support.
Teachers	Institutional constraint	English-only expectations limited flexibility for some instructors.	Classroom change is difficult to sustain without policy-level legitimacy.

Note. Themes were developed through comparison of open-ended responses, interviews, focus-group accounts, and classroom observations.

Discussion

Translanguaging as Access to Learning and Participation

The strongest findings relate to access to expression, comfort, and participation. Student agreement that translanguaging improved explanation of ideas was 93.7%. Teacher agreement that translanguaging empowered students was 93.7%. These findings provide evidence for the claim that multilingual learners draw on their existing repertoire to construct new meaning rather than learning English through an empty cognitive space (Cummins, 2007). They also support classroom research that planned movement across languages can make complex academic content more discussable (Creese & Blackledge, 2010).

Here, translanguaging seems to have worked as a participation architecture. Students may be able to generate an idea, seek peer support, and develop conceptual certainty before producing English. This sequence reduced the bar to participate in discussion but did not remove the need for English performance. This is important because an easy permission to use Urdu or Punjabi would not produce the same outcome. Pedagogical translanguaging suggests a conscious relationship between multilingual sense-making and the target task (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021).

The findings also challenge the widespread assumption that use of familiar languages necessarily hinders English learning. Eighty-one percent of students agreed that translanguaging promoted second-language acquisition. 82.5% agreed that native language use promoted learning. These perceptions do not show proficiency gains, but they do suggest that students found cross-language mediation to be supportive of English development. The key mechanism is likely to be cognitive and interactional: students will spend less time covering up uncertainty and more time negotiating meaning, comparing forms and preparing a response."

Reconstructing Classroom Power

Power in the ESL classroom is realized in access to legitimate speech. If English is the only route to participation, varying levels of fluency can translate into varying levels of visibility and authority. Translanguaging shifts this setup by enabling students to bring knowledge via a broader set of resources. The high agreement that multilingual use challenged English dominance (85.7% for students and 80.9% for teachers) suggests that participants viewed multilingual use as more than a comprehension strategy. They saw a shift in what was acceptable in the language of the classroom.

This finding is consistent with conceptualizations of translanguaging as a space for identity and agency (Li, 2011) and with arguments that multilingual education must interrogate the ideological boundaries imposed by named languages (Otheguy et al., 2015). In Lahore, this questioning does not detract from the practical value of English. Instead, it questions the assumption that English proficiency should account for whether a learner's knowledge is audible. The higher endorsement of the "challenge to English dominance" item by students may reflect students' direct experience of English as a gatekeeping norm.

Also informative is the lower student endorsement of explicit power deconstruction and empowerment (73.0%). Functional inclusion may occur before the appearance of a critical vocabulary to name hierarchy. Students may feel more comfortable and participate more, but still see the teacher, textbook, assessment, and English language as dominant. Translanguaging thus gradually reconstructs classroom power relations. First, it provides access, then it maintains repeated experiences of legitimate contribution, and only in supportive conditions might it lead to a more lasting redefinition of authority."

Teacher perceptions were more positive in terms of empowerment and hierarchy, which may be explained by their ability to see changed participation across the entire class. It may also point to a tendency to read pedagogical responsiveness as a redistribution of power. Critical perspectives suggest that a teacher can invite an explanation in Urdu, while retaining full control over when it is allowed and which English outcome is ultimately valued (Blackledge & Creese, 2010). So true redistribution is students getting durable choice, recognition, and influence over interaction, not just temporary permission.

The Productive Tension between Multilingual Access and English Practice

The most important counter finding is the concern that use of familiar languages reduces English practice. This risk was identified by almost three in ten students in open-ended responses. This concern should not be dismissed as internalized monolingual ideology, for undergraduate learners have legitimate reasons for wanting to produce English for longer stretches. English remains important for assessment, further study and employment. Hence, a responsible translanguaging approach must reject both rigid English-only instruction and informal multilingual interaction.

The results are consistent with a "planned permeability" model. Learners need to be able to cross the language boundaries for purposes of understanding, collaboration, and identity expression, but tasks should include protected stages of English output. For instance, a group might examine a case in all possible languages, build a bilingual concept map, practice an argument with the help of peers, and then deliver a long presentation in English. Reflection may be multilingual again, so that students can judge which resources helped meaning and which forms in English need further development.

This model is consistent with translanguaging pedagogy that considers languages as complementary, yet has explicit goals (García & Kleyn, 2016). It also builds on research in English medium settings that suggests that comprehension and participation are compromised when demands of policy outrun available scaffolding (Macaro et al., 2018). This is not a matter of reducing the amount of exposure to English, but of improving the quality of that exposure, so that students have something meaningful to say, and the conceptual resources to say it.

Teacher Agency and Institutional Conditions

The intervention was teacher-centered since translanguaging involves real-time decisions regarding task purpose, language choice, grouping, and transition to English output. The high levels of agreement for empowerment and participation indicate readiness for a more multilingual pedagogy. However, only 73.0% reported changing their teaching strategies, and qualitative accounts pointed to imbalance, cognitive load, large classes, and institutional rules. This gap between endorsement and everyday practice is in line with teacher-education research: a change in terminology does not automatically lead to a change in stance or design (Goodman & Tastanbek, 2021).

So professional development should go beyond general encouragement. Teachers need to experiment with designing multilingual tasks, setting expectations for output, mixing students with different repertoires, avoiding one language that they are familiar with excluding the others, and assessing English development without penalizing legitimate multilingual processes. Observation and peer review can help teachers distinguish purposeful mediation from routine translation. Legitimacy also needs to be granted at the institutional level, as an instructor cannot proceed with translanguaging if classroom observation systems equate quality with English without interruption.

The literature on Pakistan insists that policy and practice should go hand in hand. University studies show that multilingual interaction already functions as a resource for meaning-making (Panzai et al., 2023; Saleem et al., 2023), whereas policy analysis shows that named languages are still hierarchized (Syed & Shah, 2026). Realistic policy must recognize current practices, guard against linguistic discrimination of students, and state when performance based on English is pedagogically justified.

Pedagogical and Policy Implications

The findings suggest that translanguaging should be understood as a systematic cycle and not an unrestricted language choice. Table 5 shows a practical sequence that is derived from the intervention, participant concerns, and the wider literature. The cycle combines multilingual access with explicit English development and is adaptable to speaking, reading, writing, and content-based ESL activities.

Table 5

A Structured Translanguaging Cycle for Undergraduate ESL Tasks

Stage	Purpose	Illustrative practices	Power-sensitive outcome
1. Preview	Activate prior knowledge and identify key concepts.	Brainstorm in any available language; preview terminology bilingually.	All learners gain conceptual entry.
2. Mediate	Develop understanding through interaction.	Peer explanation, comparison, annotation, and collaborative problem solving across languages.	Multilingual resources become legitimate tools.
3. Perform	Produce sustained target-language output.	Present, debate, write, or role-play in English with explicit success criteria.	English practice is protected rather than displaced.
4. Reflect	Evaluate meaning, language choices, and next steps.	Discuss which resources helped; identify English forms requiring practice.	Learners develop agency and metalinguistic awareness.

Note. The cycle should be adapted to students' repertoires and should not assume that all learners share Urdu or Punjabi.

At the classroom level, teachers should clarify the purpose of each language move, ensure that multilingual group work is not exclusionary to students, and allow enough time for extended English production. Assessment should distinguish among conceptual knowledge, communicative effectiveness, and target-language accuracy, rather than conflating these with a single monolingual judgment. Materials may include bilingual glossaries, multilingual brainstorming spaces, comparative language tasks, and locally relevant discussion prompts.

At the institutional level, language policy should allow for planned multilingual mediation, maintaining transparent English-learning outcomes. In addition to technique, teacher development programs should address language ideology because classroom decisions are influenced by beliefs about legitimacy and intelligence. This recommendation is in line with a wider understanding of translanguaging as not only a method but as a stance towards multilingual learners (Vogel & García, 2017).

Limitations and Future Research

Some limitations of the study. First, the purposive sampling of selected institutions in Lahore limits the generalisability of findings to other socio-economic, regional and institutional contexts. Second, perception data are self-reported and may be influenced by social desirability or recent exposure to the intervention. Third, the article presents the post-intervention perception and the classroom-power strand instead of full inferential analysis of the proficiency outcomes. The findings therefore support claims about perceived learning, participation and power, not causal claims about language proficiency.

Fourth, the equal samples of students and teachers provide a useful comparison, but do not establish paired relationships between individual teachers and students. Fifth, the extensive use of Urdu may have masked the experiences of those speakers whose strongest languages were less well represented. Finally, a 12–16-week intervention may capture initial changes but not establish long-term sustainability.

Future research should employ longitudinal and multi-site designs, systematic classroom-discourse analysis, and compare planned translanguaging with English-only and unstructured multilingual conditions. Audio or video interaction analysis would identify who initiates language shifts, whose contributions are picked up, and if authority changes over time. Further work should also develop assessment models that can account for multilingual processes while recording growth in English accuracy, fluency, and pragmatic competence.

Conclusion

The study provides evidence from students and teachers that translanguaging can increase participation and challenge the language-based hierarchy in undergraduate ESL classrooms in Lahore. Participants associated the approach with greater clarity of expression, comfort, recognition of identity, inquisitiveness and empowerment. They also saw multilingual access as a possible threat to the symbolic supremacy of English, since knowledge could be demonstrated before English proficiency was complete.

The results do not support the replacement of English with known languages. Rather, they advocate a systematic pedagogy that draws on multilingual resources to develop understanding, make meaningful contributions, and sustain performance in English. When intentional, inclusive of multiple repertoires, supported by teacher development, and validated by institutional policy, translanguaging is pedagogically effective and socially just. In those cases, the ESL classroom can shift from a hierarchy in which English controls access to a space in which multilingual knowledge creates a path to fuller English participation.

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