



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF  
EDUCATION, PSYCHOLOGY  
AND COUNSELLING  
(IJEPC)

<https://gaexcellence.com/ijepc>



## NAVIGATING MULTILINGUAL ECOLOGIES: A CASE STUDY OF PRIMARY ESL TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON TRANSLINGUALISM IN SARAWAK

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### Article Info:

#### Article history:

Received date: 28.01.2026

Revised date: 23.02.2026

Accepted date: 25.03.2026

Published date: 31.03.2026

#### To cite this document:

Irham, N. A. A., & Zakaria, N. Y. K. (2026). Navigating Multilingual Ecologies: A Case Study of Primary ESL Teachers' Perspectives on Translingualism in Sarawak. *International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counselling*, 11(62), 1505-1522.

### Abstract:

This study investigates the pedagogical beliefs and practices of primary English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers in Sarawak, Malaysia, which is a region defined by a complex multilingual ecology where English is frequently a third or fourth language (L3/L4). While the national *English Language Education Reform: Roadmap 2015–2025* emphasizes monolingual, English-only instruction, this research explores how teachers navigate the disconnect between policy mandates and classroom realities. Drawing on Sociocultural Theory and Translanguaging, the research employed a qualitative case study design. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine purposively selected teachers, and data were analysed using thematic analysis. Findings reveal three critical themes: (1) Monolingual Guilt vs. Pragmatic Necessity, highlighting the internal tension of using home languages for cognitive scaffolding; (2) Affective Humanization, where translingual strategies are used to lower anxiety and build rapport; and (3) Strategic Compliance, where teachers perform monolingual identities during formal evaluations. The study concludes that translingualism is a sophisticated instructional competency rather than a pedagogical failure. It advocates for a shift toward context-sensitive language policies that formally recognise strategic scaffolding as a tool for educational equity and the preservation of indigenous linguistic identities.

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**DOI:** 10.35631/IJEPC.1162088 **Keyword:**ESL Pedagogy, Indigenous Languages Multilingual Ecology,  
Strategic Scaffolding, Translanguaging

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## Introduction

Malaysia is a linguistically and culturally diverse nation, where language plays a central role in shaping national identity, educational access, and social integration. The country recognizes Bahasa Malaysia as its national and official language, while English is widely used in business, higher education, and increasingly, in early schooling. At the same time, the country is home to over 130 languages, including indigenous languages spoken by ethnic groups such as the Iban, Bidayuh, Kadazan-Dusun, Orang Asli, and many others (Ethnologue, 2023).

This diversity is particularly pronounced in Sarawak, a state that is often considered one of the most linguistically rich regions in Malaysia. Home to over 40 ethnic groups, Sarawak features daily linguistic practices that include Iban, Bidayuh, Melanau, Lun Bawang, and a host of Orang Ulu languages. Many of these languages are actively spoken in homes and communities, while Bahasa Malaysia and English dominate formal education and official communication (Omar & Bakar, 2021).

In Malaysian schools, particularly primary schools, English is taught as a second language (ESL) under national curriculum frameworks. Following the implementation of the CEFR-aligned curriculum as part of the English Language Education Reform: Roadmap 2015–2025, teachers are expected to deliver lessons using English as the main language of instruction (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2020). This is meant to enhance national English proficiency levels and global competitiveness.

However, the English-only instructional approach may not be suited to all regions, especially not to linguistically complex contexts like Sarawak. Many Sarawakian pupils come to school with little exposure to English, often acquiring it as a third or even fourth language after their indigenous mother tongue and Malay. Yet, national policy does not always provide clear guidance on how to teach English in multilingual classrooms, leaving teachers to interpret and apply the curriculum as best they can.

This is where translingual pedagogy becomes relevant. Translingualism acknowledges that multilingual individuals do not switch between languages in compartmentalized ways but instead use all their linguistic resources fluidly to make meaning (Canagarajah, 2013; García, 2009; García & Wei, 2014). In the classroom, translingual strategies might involve code-

switching, translation, use of students' home languages for clarification, or even task-based interactions that draw from multiple languages simultaneously.

These strategies are not new. Teachers, especially in linguistically diverse classrooms, have long relied on students' home languages to facilitate learning. What is new, however, is the formal recognition and pedagogical framing of such practices as being not only valid, but beneficial. Research across multilingual contexts, from the Philippines (Martin, 2016) to Kenya (Benson & Kosonen, 2013), suggests that translanguing instruction improves student engagement, comprehension, and confidence.

Yet, despite these global shifts in thinking, Malaysia's national education system remains slow to embrace translanguing approaches, particularly in East Malaysian contexts like Sarawak. Much of the professional development, academic literature, and curriculum design is centred on Peninsular Malaysia, often overlooking the educational realities faced by East Malaysian teachers and learners.

This research responds to a documented gap in Malaysian language education literature, which often overlooks the unique linguistic landscapes of East Malaysian states such as Sarawak. Much of the national curriculum design, teacher education, and academic discourse is shaped by the sociolinguistic realities of Peninsular Malaysia (Gill, 2014; Pandian & Ramiah, 2021). As a result, these frameworks may not fully reflect the educational challenges and linguistic diversity faced by teachers and learners in Sarawak. Sarawak is home to over 40 ethnic groups, many of whom speak indigenous languages such as Iban, Bidayuh, Melanau, and Kenyah, creating a highly multilingual ecology (Ting & Mahadhir, 2009; Coluzzi, 2017). These languages are still actively used in households and communities, meaning that many pupils enter school with limited exposure to English and often acquire it as a third or even fourth language (Omar & Bakar, 2021; Ting, 2022).

Despite this, national education policies such as the CEFR-aligned English Language Education Reform Roadmap 2015–2025 continue to promote an English-only approach in classrooms, often without clear guidance on adapting to multilingual realities (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2020; Gill, 2014). In practice, this approach may limit the learning experiences of pupils in rural or linguistically heterogeneous areas, where English is rarely used outside the classroom (Ting, 2022; Abdul Aziz et al., 2019). Investigating how ESL teachers in Sarawak use or perceive translanguing strategies is therefore both timely and necessary. It offers a more context-sensitive understanding of English language teaching, and brings visibility to the pedagogical adaptations teachers make, often implicitly or informally, to bridge the gap between policy and practice (Canagarajah, 2013; García & Wei, 2014; Ting & Mahadhir, 2009).

Moreover, this study contributes to a growing body of scholarship advocating for more inclusive and locally relevant language pedagogies in multilingual contexts (Hornberger & Link, 2012; Martin, 2016). By focusing on Sarawakian primary school ESL teachers, this research amplifies underrepresented East Malaysian voices in national education discourse and responds to calls for a more equitable and representative approach to language policy and teacher development across Malaysia (Coluzzi, 2017; Pandian & Ramiah, 2021). Ultimately, it aims to inform ESL pedagogy in a way that honours both Malaysia's national goals and its local linguistic realities.

### ***Problem Statement***

The core issue driving this research is the mismatch between national English-only instructional mandates and the multilingual realities of Sarawakian classrooms. According to the CEFR-aligned *English Language Education Reform: Roadmap 2015–2025*, teachers are encouraged to use English exclusively in the ESL classroom to enhance students' exposure and acquisition (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2020). However, this policy often proves challenging in regions like Sarawak, where pupils come from linguistically diverse backgrounds and have limited proficiency in English. Many Sarawakian students speak indigenous languages such as Iban, Bidayuh, and Melanau at home, and use Bahasa Malaysia in daily interactions, making English their third or even fourth language (Ting, 2022; Omar & Bakar, 2021).

In this context, teachers face a pedagogical dilemma which is to comply with policy by using only English, or to rely on students' home languages as scaffolding tools, practices that are often unofficial and unsupported. Consequently, many teachers turn to translingual strategies such as code-switching, translation, and the use of L1 explanations to facilitate understanding, despite the absence of formal guidance within the national curriculum (Abdul Aziz et al., 2019; García & Wei, 2014). These practices remain largely unacknowledged in policy, leading to professional ambiguity.

Moreover, research suggests that many ESL teachers are undertrained in managing multilingual classrooms and often depend on instinct or prior teaching experience rather than theoretical or pedagogical training in translingualism (Rahman et al., 2022; Martin, 2016). Others avoid such strategies altogether for fear of contradicting national directives or undermining language learning objectives (Pandian & Ramiah, 2021). This contributes to a broader climate of professional uncertainty, where teachers lack the institutional backing to address their students' actual language needs.

While global studies increasingly support the effectiveness of translingual practices in multilingual education (Canagarajah, 2013; Hornberger & Link, 2012), empirical research in the Malaysian context especially in East Malaysia remains limited. Existing studies tend to focus on urban or Peninsular settings (Gill, 2014; Ting & Mahadhir, 2009), leaving teachers in Sarawak with little context-specific data or professional development support. This policy-practice disconnect creates classrooms marked by inconsistency, unacknowledged innovation, and missed opportunities for language development.

Therefore, this study seeks to fill a critical gap by examining how Sarawakian ESL teachers perceive and engage with translingual strategies, the challenges they encounter, and how policy environments shape their choices. By doing so, it offers insights that can inform more inclusive and context-sensitive approaches to English language teaching in Malaysia

### ***Research Purpose***

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to provide an in-depth exploration of how primary school ESL teachers in Sarawak implement translingual strategies within their specific classroom contexts. This study aims to uncover the nuanced decision-making processes of teachers, the specific ways they use local languages as cognitive tools, and the institutional pressures that shape their pedagogical choices. By focusing on specific cases of teaching

practice, the study seeks to offer context-sensitive insights that inform a more equitable approach to language policy in East Malaysia.

### ***Research Objectives***

The study is conducted for the following reasons:

1. To explore the underlying beliefs and attitudes of ESL teachers regarding the use of translanguaging in classrooms.
2. To describe how teachers strategically employ translanguaging to facilitate student learning in specific classroom contexts.
3. To analyse the institutional and policy-level factors that influence or constrain teachers' translanguaging choices in their daily practice.

### ***Research Questions***

This research is guided by these questions:

1. What are the pedagogical beliefs of primary school ESL teachers in Sarawak regarding the role of students' home languages in English instruction?
2. In what ways do ESL teachers implement translanguaging strategies to scaffold English language learning in their specific classroom settings?
3. How do school-level and national policies shape the way teachers negotiate their use of translanguaging practices?

### ***Significance of the Study***

This study holds significance for several key reasons. Firstly, it offers much-needed contextual insight into Sarawak's unique multilingual education landscape, an area often overlooked in national educational research and policymaking. By foregrounding the linguistic realities in East Malaysia, this research helps address a gap in understanding how multilingualism operates in classrooms far removed from the Peninsula-centric education discourse.

Secondly, the study provides valuable support for teachers. Through the documentation of teachers' experiences, challenges, and adaptive strategies, it delivers practical recommendations that can inform both pre-service teacher education programmes and ongoing in-service professional development initiatives. This focus on teacher voices ensures that the findings are grounded in classroom realities.

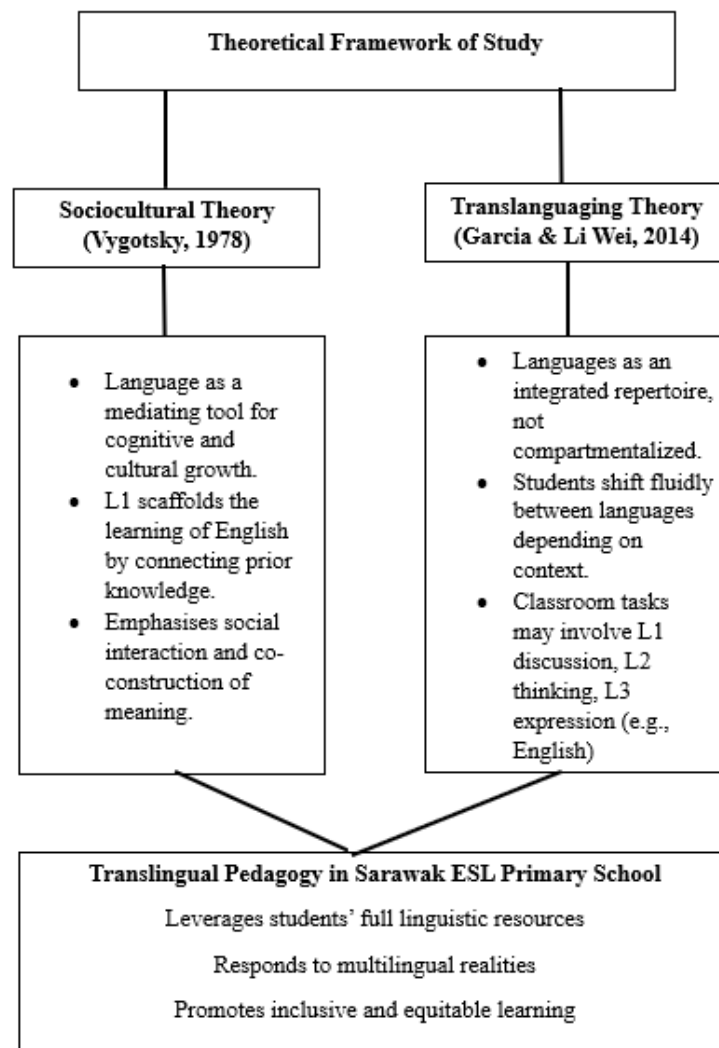
In addition, the research has the potential to influence language-in-education policy. Its findings may support the development of more inclusive and context-sensitive policies, especially in regions like East Malaysia where rigid monolingual norms can obstruct effective teaching and learning. Such evidence-based recommendations can contribute to more responsive and equitable educational practices.

Academically, the study enriches the broader field of translanguaging and multilingual education. It adds to the growing body of work that explores how teachers and students navigate complex linguistic ecologies, particularly within Southeast Asian and postcolonial contexts where colonial language hierarchies continue to shape classroom dynamics.

Ultimately, this study advocates for a more equitable, student-centred approach to English language learning that values and builds upon the rich linguistic repertoires that students bring into the classroom. In doing so, it promotes greater access, inclusion, and recognition of students' diverse linguistic identities as assets rather than obstacles.

## Literature Review

### *Theoretical Framework*



**Figure 1: Theoretical Framework of Study**

This study is grounded in two key theoretical perspectives that support the use of multiple languages in classroom settings: Sociocultural Theory and Translanguaging Theory.

Sociocultural Theory, developed by Lev Vygotsky (1978), emphasizes that learning is fundamentally social and mediated through interaction, tools, and cultural context. Among these tools, language plays the most significant role in shaping thought and knowledge. In the

context of multilingual classrooms like those in Sarawak, students' first languages (L1s) serve as vital cognitive and cultural tools for constructing new knowledge in English. For learners with low proficiency, using their L1 can scaffold learning by connecting prior understanding with new concepts.

This theory encourages educators to view learners not as passive recipients of knowledge but as socially active participants who co-construct meaning. Language becomes a bridge rather than a barrier. In Sarawak's multilingual schools, where English may be a third or fourth language for many students, using home languages can help students make sense of academic content and engage more confidently in the learning process.

Translanguaging Theory (García & Li Wei, 2014) further expands this idea by challenging the traditional separation of languages in learning environments. Rather than seeing multilingual individuals as managing separate linguistic systems, translanguaging views them as drawing fluidly from an integrated linguistic repertoire. Students do not neatly compartmentalize "English" and "Iban" or "Malay" and "Bidayuh." Instead, they use these resources flexibly and adaptively, depending on communicative and cognitive demands.

In classrooms, this means that students might use their L1 to understand a concept, discuss it with peers in a second language, and express it in English. Teachers who adopt translanguaging are not undermining English acquisition. They are enhancing it by building on what students already know. This perspective aligns with an inclusive, equity-oriented approach to language learning that acknowledges the realities of learners' linguistic practices.

Sociocultural Theory and Translanguaging Theory provide a strong conceptual foundation for this study. They not only justify the use of L1s in ESL classrooms but also foreground the importance of understanding how such strategies are perceived and implemented by teachers, especially in linguistically complex regions like Sarawak.

### ***Conceptual Definitions***

To ensure clarity and consistency throughout this study, several core constructs are defined based on both global scholarship and the Malaysian ESL context.

### ***Translingualism in ESL Classrooms***

Translingualism in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms refer to the pedagogical approach that embraces the flexible and strategic use of multiple languages within instructional settings. Rather than viewing languages as separate and hierarchical entities, translingualism promotes fluid language practices that empower learners to draw upon their full linguistic repertoires for meaning-making, comprehension, and communication. This approach challenges monolingual norms by recognizing the legitimacy of code-switching, translation, and other hybrid language practices as valuable tools for language development, particularly among learners from multilingual backgrounds (Jamaluddin, 2020; Izham, 2019; Samsiah, 2020; Kamaruddin, 2023; Chu, 2022).

In the Malaysian ESL context, translingual practices are increasingly acknowledged for their role in facilitating classroom participation and learner engagement, especially in linguistically diverse or rural settings. Studies have shown that when teachers permit the use of Bahasa

Malaysia and local dialects, students demonstrate improved confidence and greater cognitive access to instructional content (Izham, 2019; Chu, 2022). Moreover, translanguaging encourages culturally responsive teaching and promotes inclusivity by validating students' home languages as academic resources (Kamaruddin, 2023).

### ***Teacher Attitudes Towards Translanguaging***

Teacher attitudes towards translanguaging encompass educators' beliefs, perceptions, and acceptance of the use of students' first languages (L1s) within the ESL classroom. These attitudes are shaped by a range of factors including teacher education, language ideologies, institutional norms, and policy frameworks. Positive attitudes are typically associated with recognition of students' multilingual capacities and a willingness to implement flexible language practices to enhance learning. In contrast, negative or ambivalent attitudes often stem from adherence to monolingual instructional norms, concerns about over-reliance on L1, or lack of professional training (Ahmad, 2021; Tan & Lee, 2020; Rahman, 2018; Norazman, 2019; Hassan, 2023).

In the Malaysian educational context, there is growing but uneven support for translanguaging practices among teachers. While some educators acknowledge the pedagogical benefits of incorporating students' L1s particularly in low-proficiency classrooms, others remain cautious due to perceived conflicts with policy expectations or standardized assessment demands (Tan & Lee, 2020; Rahman, 2018). Research has also highlighted generational and regional differences, with younger and rural-based teachers showing more receptiveness toward integrating translanguaging strategies (Norazman, 2019; Hassan, 2023).

### ***Challenges in Implementation***

The implementation of translanguaging practices in ESL classrooms is often constrained by a range of institutional, pedagogical, and policy-related challenges. Chief among these are rigid curriculum structures, national language policies that prioritize English-only instruction, and a general lack of teacher training in multilingual pedagogies. These challenges hinder the ability of educators to integrate translanguaging strategies effectively and consistently in their teaching (Shahril, 2020; Wong, 2021; Nathaniel, 2019; Ibrahim, 2018; Lopez, 2022).

In addition to systemic barriers, teachers may also encounter practical difficulties such as classroom management issues, insufficient instructional resources, and resistance from stakeholders who equate monolingual English immersion with academic rigor (Wong, 2021; Ibrahim, 2018). Furthermore, assessments and examinations often remain monolingual in nature, creating a misalignment between teaching practices and evaluation methods (Lopez, 2022). As a result, even when teachers hold favorable attitudes toward translanguaging, their capacity to implement such practices may be limited by broader institutional constraints (Shahril, 2020; Nathaniel, 2019).

### ***Review of Related Studies***

Recent literature increasingly supports the integration of translanguaging strategies in ESL education, especially in postcolonial, multilingual settings such as Malaysia. Several key studies have investigated how these practices influence both teaching and learning in English language classrooms.

Aziz and Ooi (2021) conducted a systematic review of translanguaging research in Malaysian schools and found consistent benefits: improved comprehension, greater learner participation, and increased classroom engagement. Their follow-up study (Aziz & Ooi, 2022) highlighted that many teachers, particularly in primary settings, used students' L1s for instructions and classroom management especially when students had limited English exposure.

Somasundram and Said (2020) explored in-service ESL teachers' actual use of translanguaging practices. They found that implementation varied significantly across school types and teacher backgrounds. Some used L1 regularly and without reservation; others limited its use due to school culture or lack of support.

Ong and Mah (2021) focused specifically on teachers in Sarawak, revealing that while many teachers valued the benefits of L1 use, they also faced conflicting demands between their professional judgment and national policies. In rural schools, where English exposure is limited, the pressure to "stick to English" often created stress and confusion.

Yan and Aziz (2022) studied the impact of L1 scaffolding on reading comprehension in upper-primary classrooms. Their findings showed that translanguaging strategies not only improved students' understanding of English texts but also boosted their confidence and motivation to engage with reading.

These studies collectively suggest that translanguaging practices are already happening, often informally, in Malaysian classrooms. However, the extent, consistency, and policy support for such practices remain unclear especially in East Malaysia.

### ***Studies Supporting Translanguaging Practices***

A substantial body of global and local research affirms the educational value of translanguaging. Jamaluddin (2020) found that translanguaging strategies helped learners grasp abstract concepts more easily by building on familiar linguistic frameworks, allowing students to connect new information to what they already know. Similarly, Tan and Lee (2020) observed that classrooms where students' home languages were acknowledged saw higher levels of engagement and reduced anxiety, suggesting that the inclusion of L1 can foster a more emotionally supportive learning environment.

Hassan (2023) added that the strategic use of code-switching enabled students to reflect more consciously on their own language use, thereby enhancing their metacognitive awareness which is an essential component of language learning. Garcia and Lin (2017) emphasised that students' home languages should not be seen as obstacles, but rather as powerful tools for cognitive and social development. Their stance aligns with Canagarajah's (2013) argument that students exposed to translanguaging strategies develop greater communicative flexibility and confidence, especially when engaging with global varieties of English.

Wei (2018) further proposed that translanguaging promotes deeper linguistic reflection and encourages higher-order thinking, particularly in contexts where students are required to shift meaning across different linguistic codes. Together, these findings challenge monolingual ideologies and reinforce the idea that multilingualism is not a hindrance to English acquisition, but a valuable foundation particularly when students' full linguistic identities are recognized and embraced in the classroom.

### ***Studies Opposing Translingual Practices***

Despite the growing support for translingual pedagogy, some researchers remain cautious. Their concerns often arise from pedagogical, linguistic, or ideological perspectives. For instance, Wong (2021) warned that over-reliance on students' L1s could limit opportunities for authentic English use and reduce the benefits of immersion, potentially slowing second language acquisition. In a similar vein, Nathaniel (2019) observed that students who frequently relied on L1 during classroom tasks sometimes demonstrated weaker control over English grammar, suggesting that L1 use may impede the development of formal language structures if not balanced carefully.

Ibrahim (2018) also contributed to this discourse by arguing that students in immersion-based classrooms where L1 use is minimized showed better long-term retention of English vocabulary and syntax than those in environments that regularly permitted L1 support. Macaro (2014) added that although code-switching might provide short-term cognitive or emotional benefits, it could delay the full acquisition of essential target language structures if it becomes a routine classroom practice.

Furthermore, Turnbull and Dailey-O'Cain (2009) cautioned that excessive use of the L1 might reduce students' motivation to persist through the productive struggle of communicating in the target language, which is often necessary for developing fluency and communicative confidence. Importantly, these critiques do not entirely reject the utility of translingual strategies. Rather, they call for a balanced and intentional implementation that safeguards long-term language development. It is also worth noting that much of this critical literature is drawn from educational contexts that differ significantly from Sarawak, where students often have limited exposure to English and rely heavily on their home languages in daily life.

### ***Research Gap***

While translingual pedagogy is gaining attention globally, its implementation within the specific linguistic landscape of Sarawak remains significantly under-researched. Much of the existing literature in Malaysia centres on the Peninsular region, particularly within urban centres where students often possess a foundational exposure to English (Aziz & Ooi, 2021). These settings differ vastly from the multilingual ecologies of Sarawak, where pupils often navigate English as a third or fourth language alongside dominant mother tongues such as Iban, Bidayuh, or Melanau (Omar & Bakar, 2021). Current research trends have largely focused on the frequency of language use rather than the qualitative "how" and "why" behind these practices, leaving a gap in understanding how regional diversity shapes pedagogical choices.

Furthermore, there is a notable absence of research that captures the "human" dimension of teaching, specifically the internal tensions and decision-making processes of educators. While studies have documented that teachers often deviate from English-only mandates (Somasundram & Said, 2020), there is limited depth regarding the "pedagogical dilemma" teachers face when balancing institutional CEFR-aligned policies against the immediate cognitive needs of their students (Tan & Lee, 2020). Quantitative data can highlight that translingualism occurs, but it cannot fully articulate the emotional or professional negotiations teachers undergo when they feel "guilty" for using local languages to scaffold learning (Rahman, 2018).

Consequently, this study addresses these voids by adopting a qualitative case study approach to explore the lived experiences of primary ESL teachers in Sarawak. By moving beyond standardised metrics, this research aims to uncover the nuanced ways in which teachers strategically employ students' home languages as cognitive tools within their specific classroom ecologies (Canagarajah, 2013). This shift in focus is essential to move the academic discourse from a deficit-based view of non-English use toward a more equitable understanding of how teachers navigate the gap between rigid national policy and the multilingual realities of East Malaysian classrooms.

## **Methodology**

### ***Research Approach***

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to facilitate a profound exploration of how primary school ESL teachers in Sarawak navigate the complexities of translanguaging. Unlike quantitative methodologies that prioritise statistical generalisability and the measurement of isolated variables, a qualitative framework is uniquely suited to capturing the "how" and "why" behind pedagogical choices (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach allows the researcher to delve into the subjective realities of educators, acknowledging that teaching is not merely a technical act but a deeply social and contextual one. By focusing on qualitative inquiry, the study can illuminate the nuanced belief systems, emotional negotiations, and practices that teachers employ to bridge the gap between their pupils' diverse linguistic repertoires and the expectations of the formal English curriculum.

### ***Research Design***

The research utilises a qualitative case study design, which provides an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon. A case study is particularly effective when the researcher seeks to understand a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the environment are fluid (Yin, 2018). In this investigation, the case is defined as the professional experience of primary ESL teachers working within the multilingual ecologies of Sarawak. This design enables a detailed examination of how these specific individuals navigate institutional pressures, such as English-only mandates, while simultaneously responding to the immediate cognitive and communicative needs of their students. Through this lens, the study moves beyond a surface-level description of classroom events to provide a rich, multi-layered account of the teacher's professional identity and agency.

### ***Participants and Selection***

To ensure the collection of information-rich data, the study employs purposive sampling to select participants who possess firsthand experience with the linguistic diversity unique to Sarawak. Participants consist of primary school ESL teachers whose classrooms represent a microcosm of the state's multilingual landscape, often involving students who speak indigenous mother tongues like Iban, Bidayuh, or Melanau alongside Sarawak Malay. The selection process intentionally seeks a diverse range of teaching backgrounds, including varying levels of professional experience and geographic locations, ranging from urban centres to remote rural areas. By selecting participants who operate at the intersection of rigid national policy and fluid

local linguistic practices, the study ensures that the data reflects the authentic pedagogical dilemmas faced by educators in East Malaysia.

### ***Research Instruments***

The primary instrument for data collection in this study is the semi-structured interview, which allows for a flexible yet focused dialogue between the researcher and the participant. These interviews are designed to be "human-centred," encouraging teachers to articulate not only what they do in the classroom but also the underlying values and tensions that inform those actions. This conversational format provides the space for teachers to discuss sensitive topics, such as the guilt associated with deviating from monolingual norms or the strategic confidence they feel when using local languages as cognitive tools. Additionally, document analysis of lesson plans and school-level circulars serves as a secondary instrument, providing a textual context that helps triangulate the teachers' verbal accounts with the institutional frameworks that shape their professional lives.

### ***Data Collection Procedure***

Following administrative clearance, the researcher identifies potential participants through purposive sampling. Each candidate is provided with a detailed Participant Information Sheet which outlines the study's objectives, the nature of their involvement, and their rights as volunteers. Central to this phase is the process of informed consent, where participants are given ample time to review the document and ask questions before signing a formal consent form. This ensures that every teacher enters the study with a clear understanding that their participation is entirely voluntary and that they may withdraw at any objective without penalty. The scheduling of interviews is handled with a high degree of flexibility to accommodate the demanding workloads of primary school educators. To foster an environment of trust and open sharing, interviews are conducted at the participants' convenience and in a setting where they feel most comfortable. Recognising the geographical vastness of Sarawak and the potential challenges of reaching rural or remote school sites, the study incorporates a hybrid approach to data collection. For teachers who are unable to meet for traditional face-to-face sessions due to distance or time constraints, interviews are conducted via digital platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or Google Meet. These virtual sessions are managed with the same level of professional rigor as offline interviews, ensuring that the conversational flow remains natural and that the human element of the interaction is preserved despite the digital medium.

Each interview session, whether conducted offline or online, typically lasts between 30 to 45 minutes. With the explicit permission of the participant, the sessions are audio-recorded. These recordings are later transcribed verbatim, a critical step in qualitative research that ensures the teachers' original voices, linguistic nuances, and specific terminologies are preserved without researcher bias. This approach to documentation forms a reliable and transparent foundation for the subsequent thematic analysis, allowing the researcher to accurately reflect the lived experiences and complex pedagogical perspectives of ESL teachers navigating the multilingual ecologies of Sarawak.

### ***Data Analysis***

The analysis of the qualitative data in this study is conducted using thematic analysis, a systematic method for identifying, organising, and offering insight into patterns of meaning

across a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method is particularly suitable for a case study as it allows the researcher to move from a descriptive account of teacher perspectives to a more interpretative analysis of the sociocultural factors influencing their translingual practices. The analysis follows the rigorous six-phase framework established by Braun and Clarke (2013) to ensure the findings are grounded and verifiable.

The process begins with the familiarisation phase, where the researcher deeply engages with the data by transcribing the audio-recorded interviews and reading through the field notes multiple times. This initial immersion is crucial for identifying early impressions and recurrent voices within the Sarawakian context. Following this, the initial coding phase involves tagging segments of the text with descriptive labels. For example, excerpts where teachers describe the strategic use of Iban or Sarawak Malay to explain complex vocabulary are coded under categories such as "Cognitive Scaffolding" or "Linguistic Bridging" (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

In the third and fourth phases, these codes are grouped into potential themes, which are then reviewed and refined against the entire dataset. This ensures that the themes such as the tension between policy and practice or negotiating indigenous identity accurately represent the lived experiences of the participants rather than the researcher's preconceptions. The final phases involve defining and naming the themes to provide a clear narrative of the findings. By utilising this thematic approach, the study can effectively articulate the complex human dimension of teaching in multilingual ecologies, transforming raw interview data into a cohesive academic argument regarding the role of translingualism in Sarawakian ESL classrooms.

### ***Trustworthiness***

To establish the credibility and dependability of the findings, the study adheres to established criteria for qualitative trustworthiness. One primary strategy is triangulation, where data from interviews are compared against policy documents and field notes to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Furthermore, member checking is employed, a process where the researcher returns the interview transcripts or summary findings to the participants to confirm the accuracy of their statements and interpretations. This collaborative validation ensures that the researcher does not misrepresent the teachers' perspectives. Finally, peer debriefing with academic supervisors provides an external check on the research process, helping to minimize personal bias and ensuring that the final themes are grounded firmly in the evidence provided by the participants.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

Ethical integrity is maintained throughout the study by prioritising the protection and dignity of the participants. Every educator involved is informed of their right to voluntary participation and their ability to withdraw from the research at any time without any negative consequences. To ensure anonymity, all identifying information including the names of the teachers, their students, and their specific schools is replaced with pseudonyms in all written reports. Data is stored in secure, password-protected digital files accessible only to the researcher, fulfilling the promise of confidentiality. By adhering to these ethical standards, the study creates a safe space for teachers to share their honest perspectives on the complex, and sometimes controversial, topic of translingualism in Malaysian education.

## Findings and Discussion

### *Theme 1: The Internal Conflict of Monolingual Guilt versus Pragmatic Necessity*

The first research question investigated the pedagogical beliefs of primary ESL teachers in Sarawak regarding the role of home languages. The data reveals a consistent belief that translanguaging is a vital cognitive bridge for learners who often navigate English as a third or fourth language. However, this pragmatic belief exists in a state of tension with internalized monolingual norms. For example, Participant A observed that students frequently face orthographic confusion, applying local spelling conventions to English words (e.g., spelling "pencil" as "pensil"), which necessitates a comparative linguistic approach. While teachers like Participant G acknowledge that using local languages is often the only way to ensure students understand complex or long instructions, they simultaneously report feeling "quite guilty" for not adhering to a 100% English medium. This suggests that while teachers cognitively value multilingualism as a pedagogical asset, they still suffer from "monolingual guilt," where they feel they are deviating from the standard of a "good" English teacher as defined by national policy.

This tension highlights what Sayer (2013) describes as the monolingual dilemma, where teachers feel professionally inadequate when they deviate from English-only mandates, despite the pedagogical benefits of using the L1. The monolingual guilt expressed by participants suggests that the monolingual mandate (Cummins, 2007) is deeply ingrained in the professional identity of Malaysian teachers. This aligns with the findings of Low and Tan (2017), who noted that the absence of a formal framework for L1 use in the Malaysian curriculum leads teachers to interpret strategic translanguaging as a failure of proficiency rather than a sophisticated instructional tool. Consequently, while teachers cognitively value multilingualism as an asset, they are forced to negotiate a professional landscape that values performance over actual cognitive acquisition.

### *Theme 2: Strategic Scaffolding and Affective Humanisation*

In addressing the second research question on the implementation of translanguaging strategies, the findings indicate that teachers use the students' first languages (L1) as a sophisticated tool for both cognitive support and emotional engagement. Participant B and Participant D noted that shifting to a local tongue is a deliberate choice made when students show no signs of interest or understanding in English-only contexts. This is not merely a translation exercise but a form of "affective scaffolding." Participant I highlighted that having knowledge of a local language is "always helpful," particularly for breaking the ice. By using a local dialect to share a joke, the teacher effectively lowers the students' "affective filter" (Krashen, 1982), creating a relaxed environment where students feel safe to participate. Participant I further argued that English should not feel like an "exclusive privilege," but rather a skill that is "enhanced" by local vocabulary, thereby validating the students' indigenous identities while building their English proficiency.

The use of local dialects to humanise the classroom aligns with Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, which posits that high levels of anxiety can block the input necessary for language acquisition. By breaking the ice with local languages, Sarawakian teachers are not just translating; they are performing culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2010), acknowledging the students' indigenous identities as valid semiotic resources. This confirms

the views of Garcia and Wei (2014), who argue that translanguaging allows students to bring their whole selves into the classroom. Instead of viewing English as an exclusive privilege as stated by Participant I, these translanguaging practices democratise the learning space, ensuring that English is built upon rather than at the expense of the students' existing linguistic repertoires.

### ***Theme 3: Strategic Compliance and the "Observer Effect"***

The final research question examined how institutional and national policies, such as the CEFR-aligned Roadmap, shape teacher choices. The analysis reveals a significant policy-practice disconnect, leading to a phenomenon of strategic compliance. When asked if they would alter their language use in the presence of a school inspector (Nazir), the majority of the nine participants responded affirmatively. Participant A explained that "Nazir would expect an English teacher to use 100% English," regardless of the students' actual proficiency levels. This sentiment was echoed by Participant H, who expressed a sense of "reluctance" to use other languages during observations because it is officially "not allowed." Participant I also noted that a strictly enforced "English-only" environment often results in a "silent class with kids feeling scared to speak up," yet teachers feel forced to perform this monolingual identity for the sake of administrative approval.

This "Observer Effect" creates a paradox where the very strategies teachers find most effective are hidden during formal evaluations to maintain the appearance of policy adherence. This resonates with the concept of policy negotiation (Menken & García, 2010), where teachers act as the ultimate arbiters of language policy in the classroom, often operating underground to meet student needs. The results suggest that the rigid "English-only" expectations of the CEFR Roadmap create a performative environment where teachers prioritise administrative compliance over pedagogical efficacy. As Participant I noted, such enforcement often results in a "silent class," suggesting that the current top-down policy may inadvertently hinder the communicative goals it seeks to achieve. This highlights the urgent need for a context-sensitive policy (Canagarajah, 2005) that recognises the unique multilingual ecologies of East Malaysia.

### **Implications**

The theoretical implications of this study reinforce the value of Sociocultural Theory, specifically demonstrating how the students' first language (L1) serves as a semiotic tool within the Zone of Proximal Development. The findings suggest that for learners in Sarawak, the L1 is not an impediment to English acquisition but a foundational resource that facilitates it. The study implies that the definition of professional excellence in a multilingual setting includes linguistic flexibility. Rather than viewing translanguaging as a deficit, the data suggests it is a high-level instructional competency. By acknowledging the role of the students' linguistic repertoire, educators can ensure that the transition into English proficiency is additive rather than subtractive, preserving the students' cultural identity while achieving the objectives of the national curriculum.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the lived experiences of the participants, several constructive recommendations are offered to enhance the delivery of ESL education. It is recommended that the Ministry of Education and regional education departments consider providing more explicit guidelines on

the strategic use of scaffolding in linguistically diverse areas. Such guidance would support teachers in using translingual strategies effectively and transparently, ensuring they feel confident that their methods align with national goals. Furthermore, teacher professional development programs could benefit from including sessions on strategic scaffolding techniques, helping educators maximise English exposure while using local languages as a purposeful bridge. School leaders are also encouraged to support a multilingual-friendly atmosphere that recognises the linguistic heritage of the community as a stepping stone toward global English proficiency.

### **Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

While this study provides valuable qualitative insights, it is limited by its specific focus on nine participants, which means the findings are context-bound and not intended for broad statistical generalisation. The data also relies on self-reported narratives, which provide depth but could be complemented by future longitudinal studies involving direct classroom observations over an extended period. Further research could also explore the perspectives of school inspectors (Nazir) and policymakers to foster a more collaborative dialogue on how translingualism can be officially integrated into training frameworks. Additionally, investigating the impact of translingual scaffolding on student learning outcomes in rural versus urban Sarawakian schools would provide a more comprehensive view of the state's educational landscape.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this research has highlighted the essential role of teachers as navigators within the multilingual ecologies of Sarawak. The study has shown that Participants A through I are deeply committed to the national mission of English language excellence, often going to great lengths to ensure their students are not left behind. By viewing translingualism as a supportive scaffolding tool rather than a challenge to policy, the education system can further empower teachers to meet the needs of every learner. Ultimately, the goal is to ensure that the English language becomes an accessible and inclusive bridge for all Sarawakian children, allowing them to participate in the global community while remaining firmly rooted in their own rich linguistic and cultural identities.

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- Acknowledgements:** The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia for providing the necessary resources and support throughout the course of this research. Special appreciation is extended to colleagues and peers who contributed valuable insights and constructive feedback, which greatly enhanced the quality of this paper.
- Funding Statement:** No funding.
- Conflict of Interest Statement:** The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper. All authors have contributed to this work and approved the final version of the manuscript for submission to the International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counselling (IJEPC).
- Ethics Statement:** This study was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. The data collected were used solely for academic purposes.
- Author Contribution Statement:** All authors contributed significantly to the development of this manuscript.
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