

Empowering Learners' Metalinguistic Awareness and Multilingual Competence in the Language Classroom: Exploring Teachers' Beliefs and Practices

Dr.Nada Alghali

King Saud University, Saudi Arabia
Nalghali@ksu.edu.sa

Abstract

The study examines how teacher beliefs and behaviours support English language learners to build metalinguistic awareness and multilingual competence. Metalinguistic awareness in multilingualism involves intentional connections between languages, enabling learners to comprehend syntactic, morphological, lexical, phonological, and pragmatic features of the second language (Anderson, 2005; Hu, 2002). Within the Vygotskian sociocultural theory of language learning, this study examines how teachers' attitudes and pedagogical practices impact learners' autonomy and agency in English language learning. In this study, constructivism highlights students' agency in actively producing knowledge while considering multilingualism. The study uses an explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach (Creswell, 2014) to quantitatively analyse teacher beliefs and practices that are captured through a survey using descriptive and inferential statistics, followed by semi-structured interviews using thematic analysis (Braun and Clark, 2006) to explore teacher barriers and strategies. Both phases indicate that teachers with great metalinguistic awareness and belief in learner autonomy are more likely to use techniques that empower learners to take ownership of their learning. Yet, neither of these beliefs constructs significantly correlates with the use of empowering classroom practices. The study highlights the need for a supportive language learning environment that encourages reflection and utilisation of varied linguistic resources. This study explores teachers' ideas and behaviours, advancing language teaching methods that encourage metalinguistic awareness, learner autonomy, and multilingualism.

Keywords: *Metalinguistic Awareness, Multilingual Competence, Translanguaging, ESL Classroom, Learner Autonomy, Multilingualism*

1. Introduction

In today's world, learner autonomy is debatable as to whether learning outcomes and instructed foreign language learning are different from the naturalistic environment of using multilingual strategies to support learning a second language in the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom. A multilingually competent individual has the knowledge and ability to use multiple languages, both native and additional languages (Cook, 2020). The concept of metalinguistic awareness plays a crucial role in language learning as it enables learners to comprehend and understand language as a system. This increased awareness allows students to recognise patterns, make connections between languages, and apply strategies that facilitate the acquisition of new linguistic skills. In an ESL classroom, fostering metalinguistic awareness can empower students to navigate multilingual environments more effectively and independently. The main issue boils down to the resistance to using the home language when teaching ESL, regardless of the trends towards a more translanguaging environment that empowers learner autonomy to use their full linguistic repertoire. This resistance is a result of many conditions, one of which is the gap between teachers' perceptions and beliefs on multilingual competence and the actual practices that they deploy in the contexts of ESL classrooms.

2. Local Context of Saudi Arabia

In the context of Saudi Arabia, where this study is conducted, the issue is exacerbated by persistent misconceptions regarding metalinguistic awareness, multilingual competence, and translanguaging. To contextualise the study, we need to understand that Arabic is the official and supreme language in the KSA because it has cultural, religious, educational, and communication associations. English is the

second language taught in Saudi public schools according to the regulations of the Ministry of Education (MOE, 2025). In many cases, Arabic and English are used together. Most road signs, publications, and websites are in Arabic and English. Culture, traditions, and customs, which symbolise domestic and local identity, also follow the association between Arabic and religion. On the contrary, English is connected to wider world associations such as entertainment, travel, shops, and restaurants. Hopkyns and Elyas (2022) highlighted that this ideological divide affects people's linguistic identities, which include feelings of guilt or discomfort in mixing languages, particularly in English-only or Arabic-only zones.

As for teaching and learning English as a foreign language in university-level contexts, the medium of instruction usually depends on the discipline, as science and medical disciplines tend to be taught in English since all textbooks are in English. Nevertheless, conventional language education methodology still prevails, relying entirely on adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries between languages (Alhazmi, 2024).

Recent research, such as that conducted by Al-Ahdal (2020); Alasmari et al. (2022); Alzabidi and Al-Ahdal (2022) has already investigated the implications of multilingualism and the implementation of translanguaging strategies, looking at teachers' ideologies for implementing translanguaging as pedagogy. Al-Ahdal (2022) argued that translanguaging is rarely present in Saudi English classrooms. This indicates the traditional view of English language teaching, which prohibits the use of the first language in the classroom and has been inherited by the education system.

Alqahtani (2022) investigated the potential and implications of the future of translanguaging in Saudi Arabia, aligning with the Saudi 2030 vision. Precisely, looking at whether teaching staff are aware, trained, and ready to use translanguaging in the ESL classrooms. He concludes that learners' exposure to translanguaging is limited, and teachers need training to implement it effectively. In addition, there is a need for greater openness and learner involvement in pedagogical decisions to address their needs. Thus, reflecting and suggesting a need for empowering learner autonomy.

While studies of multilingual teacher beliefs and practices in the language classroom are widely established in the literature, there still remains a gap in understanding these beliefs and how they are reflected as teaching practices in relatively monolingual environments (e.g. Saudi Arabia) where languages are traditionally taught in isolation. Only a few studies have investigated these settings (Alharbi, 2019, Almayez, 2022; Alghamdi, 2021), revealing a misalignment between the beliefs and practices of English teachers. Practical activities to engage learners' multilingual competences are often restricted or underutilised.

3. Research Questions

This paper aims to answer three research questions:

RQ1: To what extent do University ESL teachers in Saudi Arabia possess the components of multilingual cognition

RQ2: In what ways do University ESL teachers' multilingual beliefs reflect on their classroom practices in Saudi Arabia?

RQ3: How can University ESL teachers in Saudi Arabia empower learners to take ownership of their language learning and develop metalingual competence and metalinguistic awareness?

4. Methodology

To answer the above questions, this study follows an explanatory sequential mixed-method design (Creswell, J.W., 2014) to investigate and understand ESL teacher beliefs and practices of multilingual practices in the language classroom. In this two-phase design, a quantitative survey was used first to gather answers from ESL teachers and was analysed quantitatively. After that, and based on the answers from teachers, a follow-up open-ended interview was conducted with those who showed their interest in being interviewed, as per their survey responses. Typically, the second phase builds on answers from the survey so as to elaborate and explain in more detail the initial survey answers qualitatively. The qualitative part of conducting semi-structured interviews provides further interpretations and determines what further quantitative data needs explanation. As this study represents the ESL university-level teachers in KSA, purposive sampling was used (Bryman, A 2016) to reflect the views and practices of

those ESL teachers. The survey was adapted and slightly localised from Osidak, V., et al. (2024) to fit the aim and scope of the current research. After that, it was sent to two Saudi colleagues who are experts in the field of ESL and classroom practices to review and validate the survey's questions. Some modifications were made based on their feedback, which were then finalised on the Google Forms platform and sent via email and WhatsApp groups.

The survey starts with the demographic information and background knowledge of the teacher, then measures the responses of teachers' beliefs on multilingualism within 33 items on a scale from (1-Totally agree, 2 agree, 3 disagree, 4 totally disagree) to gauge teachers' multilingual cognition and their understanding of the social context. In addition, there was an option of (5 have never thought about it). The third section reflects the application of multilingual beliefs in the English classroom, consisting of 17 items on a Likert scale ranging from (1 Never, 2 rarely, 3, sometimes, 4 very often, 5 always). The last part of the questionnaire asks the participants to share their email for a follow-up interview if they are willing to do so to elaborate on their answers further.

4.1 Study Sample

The total number of University ESL teachers is (n=68) distributed equally between 34 males and 34 females. Most teachers in this study have an experience of 10 or more years, representing 76.5% in total, and only 13.2% have a lower (7-9 years of experience). The remaining fall into the category of (1-3) 2.9% and (4-6) 7.4%. As for the multilingual status of participants, a high percentage of teachers acknowledged that they are multilingual, as shown in the table below.

Table 1. *Multilingual status of teachers*

Are you multilingual?	Percentage
Yes	58.8%
No	39.7%
Have never thought about it	1.5%

In general, the participants in the study are aware of / have high knowledge of the key terminologies/concepts, as shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2. *Knowledge of key concepts*

Concept	Yes	No
Are you familiar with the idea of Translanguaging	75%	25%
Are you familiar with the idea of metalinguistic awareness?	75%	25%
Are you familiar with the idea of multilingual competence?	91.2%	8.8%

4.2 Procedure

The quantitative part of the survey was transferred to SPSS and coded numerically. Descriptive statistics (percentage, mean, median, mode and standard deviation) and Pearson correlation were used to test research questions 1 and 2. Descriptive statistics helped to get an overall insight into teachers' multilingual beliefs and how frequently multilingual practices are employed in the classroom. Pearson correlation analysis was used to measure the strength and direction of the correlations between the participants' beliefs and their self-reported use of multilingual practices. The items measuring teachers' multilingual cognition in the survey are divided into: cognitive characteristics of multilingual teachers, psycholinguistic knowledge in multiple language acquisition, metalinguistic knowledge in multiple

language acquisition, and cross-linguistic knowledge in multiple language acquisition. In addition to knowledge of multilingual approaches and beliefs about teachers' multilingual identity. The last section pertains to reflecting on the teaching practices corresponding to the above-mentioned themes. To answer research RQ3, thematic analysis was used for teachers' interviews. Interviews are conducted through Zoom and transcribed through (otter.ai). Key themes are divided into: institutional barriers, teacher confidence and training needs, effective multilingual strategies, and student autonomy and multilingual learning engagement.

5. Results

5.1 Components of ESL Teachers' Multilingual Cognition: Beliefs and Practices

The first phase in this study aims to answer whether University ESL teachers in Saudi Arabia possess the components of multilingual cognition. On average, the participating teachers hold strong, positive beliefs regarding all six components of teacher beliefs themes. The mean scores for the belief themes fall between 1.56 and 2.08. Given that the response scale ranged from 1 ("Totally agree") to 4 ("Totally disagree"), these low mean scores signify a high level of agreement with the principles of multilingualism. The strongest agreement was observed for "Cognitive Characteristics" ($M = 1.57$), while the least strong was for "Crosslinguistic Knowledge" ($M = 2.09$).

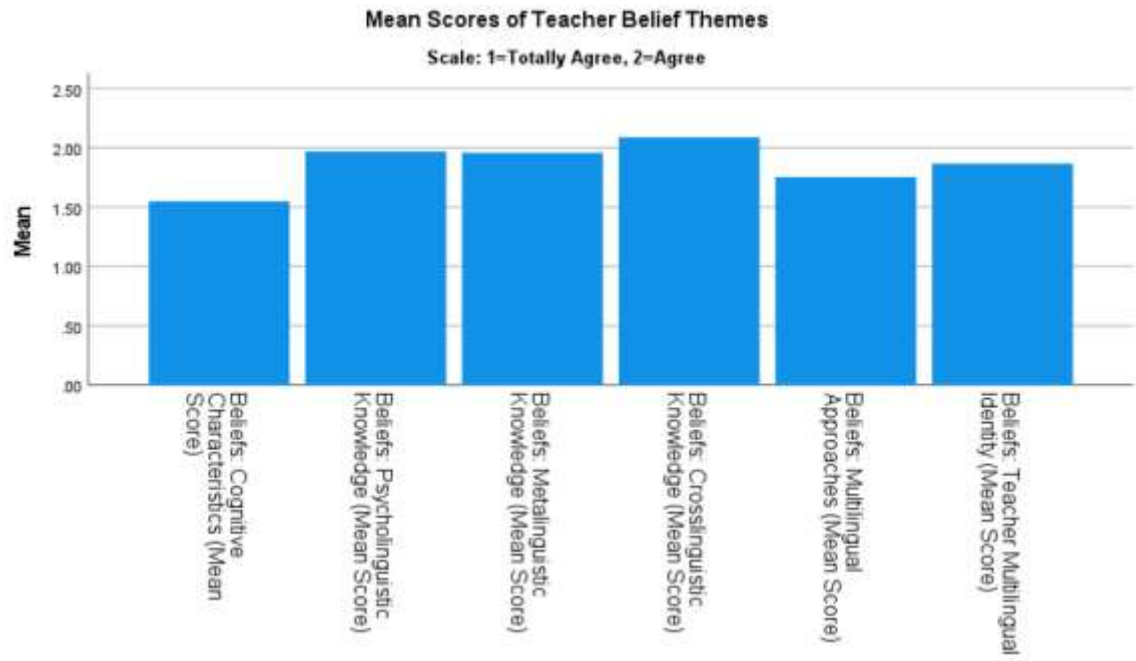


Figure 1: Mean scores of teacher belief themes

Figure 1 provides a visual comparison of the mean scores for the six belief themes. The chart clearly illustrates the consistency of teachers' positive beliefs, with all bars clustered tightly within the "Agree" range of the scale (scores between 1.0 and 2.0). This visualisation reinforces the finding that teachers in this sample broadly endorse the theoretical benefits of multilingualism across all measured domains.

As for classroom practices, Graph 2 below visually represents the mean frequency of the four practice themes. This chart makes it easy to compare the relative frequency of different pedagogical approaches. The mean scores for the four practice themes range from 2.75 to 3.76 on a five-point scale, where 3 represents "Sometimes" and 4 represents "Very Often." The most frequently reported practices are those related to "Engaging Cognitive Characteristics" ($M = 3.76$), while the least frequent are those related to "Crosslinguistic Implementation" ($M = 2.75$). Thus, providing a clear picture of the practical priorities in the classroom.

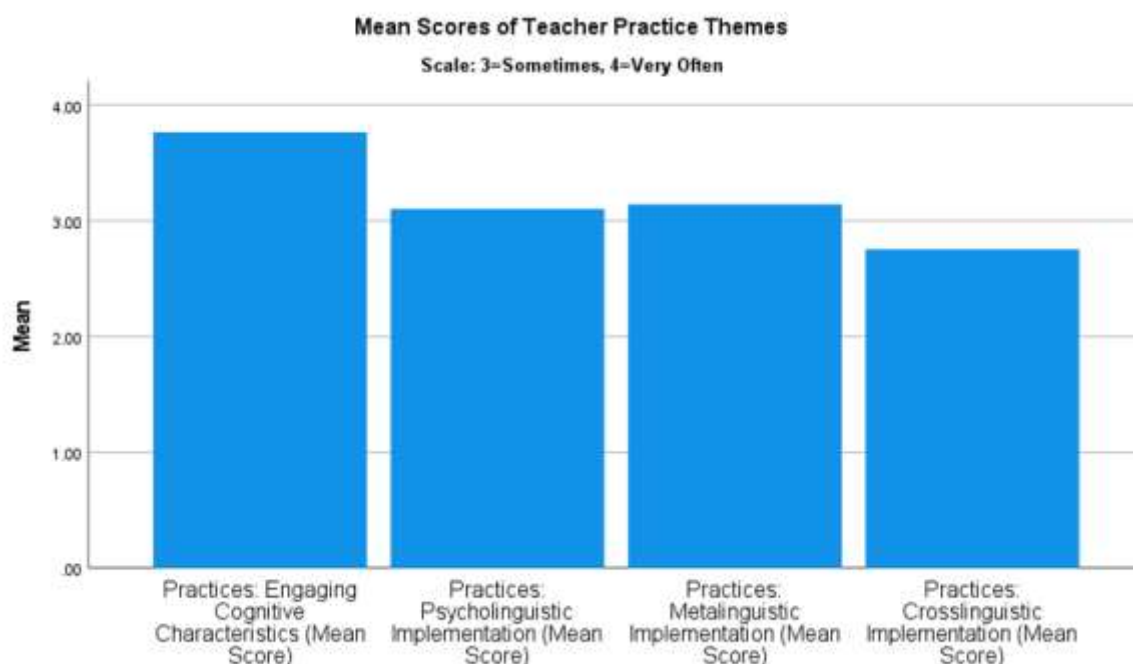


Figure 2: Mean scores of teacher practice themes

To explore how teachers' beliefs reflect on their practices, Pearson correlation analysis was used to measure the strength and direction of the relationships between their beliefs and self-reported practices. This directly helped in identifying the "belief-practice gaps" where I specifically compared the composite scores of each belief theme with their corresponding practice themes. The data show no statistically significant correlations between any of the belief themes and their practice-based counterparts. Furthermore, the Pearson Correlation coefficients (r) are all very close to zero, indicating an absence of a meaningful linear relationship. This finding points to a significant belief-practice gap, suggesting that teachers' theoretical agreement with multilingual principles does not predict their use of related strategies in the classroom.

To answer my third research question, correlation analysis was used to test several relations as presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Correlation between beliefs and practices

		Beliefs:Metalinguistic Knowledge(Mean Score)	Beliefs:Learner Autonomy(Mean Score)	Practices:Empowering Learners (Mean Score)
Beliefs: Metalinguistic Knowledge(Mean Score)	Pearson Correlation	1	.351**	-.020
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.004	.870
	N	68	67	68
Beliefs:Learner Autonomy(Mean Score)	Pearson Correlation	.351**	1	-.102
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.004		.412
	N	67	67	67
Practices:	Pearson Correlation	-.020	-.102	1

Empowering Learners(Mean Score)	Sig.(2-tailed)	.870	.412	
	N	68	67	68

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The results here reveal two key findings central to the research hypotheses. First, there is a moderate, positive, and statistically significant correlation between teachers' beliefs in metalinguistic knowledge and their beliefs in learner autonomy ($r = .351, p = .004$). The significance value is less than .01, indicating a strong likelihood that this relationship is not due to chance. This suggests that teachers who value the importance of metalinguistic awareness also tend to believe in fostering learner autonomy.

Second, and most critically, neither of these belief constructs significantly correlates with the use of empowering classroom practices. The relationship between "Metalinguistic Beliefs" and "Empowering Practices" is negligible ($r = -.020, p = .870$). Similarly, the relationship between "Autonomy Beliefs" and "Empowering Practices" is very weak and not statistically significant ($r = -.102, p = .412$).

5.2 Learner Empowerment to Develop Metalingual Competence and Metalinguistic Awareness.

University ESL teachers in Saudi Arabia can empower learners to take ownership of their language learning and develop metalingual competence and metalinguistic awareness by adopting strategies that balance institutional expectations with learner-centred practices.

Teachers emphasised the importance of student autonomy through activities such as association games, Quizlet-based vocabulary practice, and independent research tasks (T1). Encouraging learners to experiment with multiple languages when brainstorming, translating, or summarising texts helped them develop awareness of linguistic structures and cross-linguistic transfer (T2, T3). These practices enabled students to compare forms, meanings, and usage across languages, thus enhancing their metalinguistic awareness. At the same time, teachers highlighted that empowerment requires structured guidance: scaffolding translingual strategies so learners do not over-rely on their L1 (T1), creating opportunities for students to explain concepts to peers (T3), and explicitly teaching how similarities and differences between Arabic and English shape errors and learning pathways (T2).

Finally, professional development was seen as essential for equipping teachers with practical multilingual strategies and helping them embed language learning in meaningful, contextualized tasks. Through this, students gain the tools to self-direct their learning, engage more confidently with English, and gradually build competence not only in the target language but also in understanding how languages function in relation to one another.

Table 4: Thematic Summary Table

Theme	Interview Quote
1-Institutional Barriers	T1 described how the exam-driven culture pushes students to “learn as much as they can in the short amount of time so they can pass the test,” which limits more natural approaches to language learning T3 echoed these concerns but also stressed the lack of institutional support for multilingualism: “maybe there’s a little bit more of turning a blind eye if it happens, definitely not seen any encouragement.”
2-Teacher Confidence and Training Needs	T2 demonstrated strong confidence and advocacy, comparing L1 use to seasoning: “Using L1 is like salt in the food — not too much, but to make it taste better.” He described conducting workshops and proposals and emphasized the need for institutional recognition of multilingual practices rather than personal skill-building. T3 also exhibited confidence, drawing on personal multilingual experience: “methods I have used when I’ve

	learned other languages... I work, what worked for me well."Stressing the need for hands on practical training.
3-Effective Multilingual Strategies	T2 actively engaged students' L1 through translation, dialect-formal Arabic comparisons, and explicit focus on interference between Arabic and English, particularly for lower-level learners who "often need it more." T3 described a flexible, scaffolded approach, allowing students to "look up definitions in their L1" or discuss concepts in Arabic, provided that final outputs were in English. She also encouraged translation-and-summarization tasks, noting that these activities "show comprehension and excite them."
4-Student Autonomy	T2 framed autonomy as essential to all learning, encouraging self-directed exploration and even facilitating an extracurricular WhatsApp learning group. T3 promoted autonomy through peer scaffolding and mini-research projects, allowing students to access information in their L1 but holding them accountable for L2 production. Across all cases, autonomy was seen as both a goal and a method for deepening engagement and responsibility in language learning.
5-Multilingual Learning Engagement	T2 reported that students "love and appreciate" opportunities to use their L1 in learning, finding translation tasks motivating. T3 emphasized the confidence-building effects of translanguaging, particularly for lower-level learners: "it does excite them to use both at the same time."

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study are in many ways consistent with the findings of the studies carried out in KSA and other countries regarding teachers' multilingual beliefs. Studies demonstrate a significant positive correlation between metalinguistic awareness and language dominance in Saudi ESL learners (Almarshedi, 2022; Aljafen, 2022). Elevated metalinguistic awareness correlates with greater adherence to the dominant language, facilitating effective intercultural communication (Aljafen, 2022). This study illustrates that while Saudi university ESL instructors strongly support the importance of multilingual techniques, their implementation is affected by institutional barriers, inadequate training, and classroom realities. Quantitative results revealed significant support for multilingual approaches, although a lack of trust in their implementation, while interviews showed that educators often relied on personal experience and peer learning rather than formal training. The results demonstrate that empowering learners in Saudi ESL environments requires both teacher-initiated multilingual techniques and systemic support through professional development.

The data obtained in this research indicate no statistically significant correlations between any of the belief themes and their practice-based counterparts. Borg (2015) asserts that educators' instructional choices and practical practices are significantly shaped by their beliefs, which are often hard to change.

Within the established multilingual teaching practices measured in the survey are the use of students' L1 for meaning construction, translanguaging and translation, crosslinguistic comparison, emphasis on language structure, and collaborative learning. In the Saudi context, in higher-level education, it can be posited that the emphasis on an English-only policy may explain why the teachers in this study do not utilise multilingualism as a resource in the language classroom, despite their strong reported beliefs in multilingualism.

Teachers' language learning approaches in the classroom primarily adhere to a 'communicative' strategy that emphasises interaction, implicit language acquisition, and an exclusive English policy. They often employ a language awareness strategy that prioritises a conventional emphasis on form, grammatical

understanding, word formation patterns, syntactic structure, and linguistic terminology. Improving students' linguistic awareness provides them with a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the subject, skills, and processes, transforming their role from passive recipients to active participants in learning.

The primary limitation of this study is its relatively small scale. Also, self-reported data is sometimes subjective. The results, however, provide a general understanding of the multilingual ideas and pedagogical approaches of English university-level instructors in KSA. The study suggests a potential for future research on practices that empower learners' autonomy by promoting strategies that enhance their multilingual competence and metalingual awareness. Teacher training and professional development explicitly targeting multilingual education are essential, considering the findings. These programs should encompass theoretical knowledge, practical solutions, and classroom management techniques to integrate students' plurilingual resources into learning. To improve teacher professional development, English-only policies in KSA must be adjusted to allow for the strategic use of students' L1 and other languages as classroom materials. This can be accomplished by the incorporation of plurilingual activities within the curriculum, promoting the utilisation of translanguageing, cross-linguistic comparisons, mediation, and translation techniques. Furthermore, rectifying belief-practice disparities by involving language educators in reflective practices and critical analysis of these differences can more effectively match their multilingual views with classroom practices. Future research could explore the long-term impact of learner autonomy on language proficiency and the role of technology in promoting learner autonomy. The findings of this study may help establish a course on multilingualism designed to enhance teachers' awareness and provide them with practical skills for implementing multilingual practices in the English classroom.

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