



Challenges and Solutions in Teaching English to Multilingual Students at Torphan Rojjanawich School, Thailand

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Abstract

English language teaching (ELT) in multilingual classrooms presents complex pedagogical challenges, particularly in rural and border-area contexts where students navigate multiple local languages alongside the national language. At Torphan Rojjanawich School in Satun, southern Thailand, students commonly speak Malay at home, use Thai in formal and academic domains, and learn English as a third or fourth language. This linguistic situation often results in cross-linguistic interference, limited English exposure, uneven proficiency levels, and varying cognitive readiness for language learning. This study investigates the challenges faced by English teachers in this multilingual context, focusing on the linguistic, cognitive, and socio-cultural barriers that affect students' English acquisition. It also examines the instructional strategies employed to address these challenges and their impact on learning outcomes. Adopting a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with ten English teachers, classroom observations across multiple grade levels, and surveys administered to one hundred students. The findings reveal persistent difficulties related to vocabulary development, reading comprehension, and oral communication, largely influenced by limited exposure to English beyond the classroom and differences in students' native languages. Teachers responded through differentiated instruction, multimedia-supported learning, peer collaboration, and bilingual or multilingual scaffolding. These strategies were found to enhance comprehension, reduce learner anxiety, and increase engagement. The study contributes empirical insights into multilingual ELT practices in resource-limited settings and underscores the importance of teacher development and institutional support in fostering equitable and effective English language education in multilingual societies.

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INTRODUCTION

In multilingual societies, the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language present a unique set of pedagogical, cognitive, and socio-cultural challenges (Cenoz & Gorter, 2017; UNESCO, 2023). These challenges are particularly pronounced in regions where students grow up using multiple languages in their homes and communities, resulting in significant variations in linguistic competence and learning readiness (OECD, 2019; De Angelis, 2019). In such environments, English is not merely an additional language but a foreign system layered upon pre-existing linguistic frameworks that learners must navigate concurrently, often increasing cognitive load and cross-linguistic interference (Kormos, 2017; Macaro, 2018). This reality necessitates a re-examination of traditional English language teaching (ELT) methodologies and calls for pedagogical innovations that are sensitive to the complexities of multilingual learners (García & Wei, 2018).

Thailand represents one such multilingual context. Although Thai is the official language and the primary medium of instruction in most schools, the country's southern provinces—particularly Satun—exhibit a rich mosaic of linguistic diversity shaped by historical, cultural, and cross-border interactions (Premrirat & Burusphat, 2019). Communities in this region consist of speakers of Thai, Malay, and various regional dialects, creating a sociolinguistic environment in which multilingualism is the norm rather than the exception (Draper, 2015; Hamid, Nguyen, & Baldauf, 2019). Satun Province, located along the border with Malaysia, is home to a substantial Malay-speaking population whose daily language practices frequently involve code-switching between Thai, Malay, and local vernaculars (Lee, 2019; Saengboon, 2020). Within this diverse linguistic landscape, schools such as Torphan Rojjanawich School serve student populations that directly reflect these multilingual realities in their everyday classroom interactions.

Torphan Rojjanawich School in Satun provides a vivid case study of the educational implications of multilingualism in a border-area context. Students enrolled in the school commonly speak Malay as their home language, use Thai in public and official domains, and are required to learn English as part of the national curriculum, resulting in layered multilingual repertoires within a single learning environment (Baker & Wright, 2017). This coexistence of multiple languages creates a complex linguistic ecology that significantly shapes students' English language acquisition processes, particularly when English functions as a third or even fourth language (Cenoz & Gorter, 2019). In this context, English often has limited communicative relevance beyond the classroom, which restricts learners' exposure to authentic language use and reduces opportunities for meaningful practice. Consequently, English is frequently perceived by students as an abstract academic subject rather than a functional medium of communication, a perception commonly reported in rural and multilingual EFL settings (Lee & Macaro, 2022).

Numerous studies have documented the effects of linguistic diversity on English language acquisition, particularly in contexts where learners use multiple languages in their daily lives. One of the key theoretical frameworks relevant to this issue is Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which posits that language learning is inherently social and mediated through cultural tools, interaction, and shared meaning-making practices (Lantolf & Thorne, 2015). Within this framework, language acquisition is viewed not as a linear process but as one shaped by learners' prior linguistic knowledge, social interaction, and the instructional environment in which learning occurs (Swain, Kinnear, & Steinman, 2015). In multilingual settings, interaction between different linguistic systems frequently leads to language transfer, whereby structures and rules from a learner's first language influence English use (Odlin, 2016; Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2020). Such cross-linguistic influence may result in persistent errors, particularly in syntax, grammar, and word order (Ortega, 2019).

For instance, Malay-speaking students may experience structural interference in English due to fundamental syntactic differences between the two languages. While English typically places adjectives before nouns, Malay follows a noun–adjective order, a contrast that frequently leads to word-order errors in English production. These differences can contribute to the fossilization of grammatical errors in both written and spoken English (Han, 2014). Furthermore, when learners regularly shift between languages with distinct phonological, morphological, and syntactic systems, the cognitive load involved in processing and internalizing a new language increases substantially (De Angelis, 2019). This heightened cognitive demand may slow language acquisition, weaken retention, and negatively affect learners' confidence in using English for communication (Sweller, Ayres, & Kalyuga, 2019; Saito & Hanzawa, 2018).

In addition to linguistic interference, students at Torphan Rojjanawich School face limited exposure to English beyond the formal classroom environment. Unlike urban contexts where English is frequently encountered through media, tourism, and extracurricular activities, rural provinces such as Satun provide few opportunities for authentic language use (Hamid et al., 2019). This restricted exposure constrains learners' engagement with English in meaningful communicative contexts, thereby hindering the development of communicative competence (MacIntyre, Gregersen, & Mercer, 2020). In such circumstances, classroom instruction becomes the primary site of English learning, placing considerable pedagogical pressure on teachers to address wide-ranging proficiency levels and diverse linguistic backgrounds simultaneously.

The resulting challenges manifest in multiple ways, including weak reading comprehension, limited vocabulary development, difficulties in oral expression, and declining learner motivation (Nation, 2013). For many multilingual learners, English becomes associated with confusion, anxiety, and repeated academic difficulty, which can reduce willingness to participate in classroom activities (Teimouri, Goetze, & Plonsky, 2019). Consequently,

teachers are required not only to deliver curriculum content but also to bridge linguistic and cultural gaps, scaffold comprehension, and sustain student engagement under demanding instructional conditions (Gao, 2021).

To address these challenges, educators must adopt inclusive, student-centered pedagogical strategies that accommodate learners' diverse linguistic backgrounds and proficiency levels. One widely supported approach is differentiated instruction, which involves adjusting teaching methods, learning materials, and assessment practices according to students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles (Tomlinson, 2001; Tomlinson & Moon, 2016). Research has shown that differentiated instruction is particularly effective in linguistically diverse classrooms, as it provides multiple pathways for students to access content and demonstrate understanding (Bondie, Dahnke, & Zusho, 2019). At Torphan Rojjanawich School, teachers have begun to apply flexible grouping, bilingual scaffolding, and multimodal instruction to support learners with varying linguistic and cognitive needs.

Multimedia tools also play a crucial role in supporting English learning in multilingual classrooms. Videos, interactive games, and visual aids function as effective instructional resources for increasing student engagement and reinforcing vocabulary and grammatical structures in accessible and memorable ways (Webb & Nation, 2017; Mayer, 2020). Vocabulary presented through images, animations, and contextualized video clips has been shown to result in stronger retention than text-only instruction (Peters & Webb, 2018). Such multimedia-supported instruction can partially compensate for limited English exposure by providing semi-authentic input and enhancing learner motivation (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015).

Another effective approach involves recognizing and strategically incorporating students' first languages within the English classroom. Contemporary pedagogical perspectives emphasize L1 use as a cognitive and linguistic resource rather than a barrier (Cummins, 2017). Allowing students to

brainstorm ideas in their native language before expressing them in English has been shown to enhance conceptual clarity and reduce anxiety. Additionally, collaborative activities involving guided translation or code-switching can strengthen metalinguistic awareness and promote deeper engagement with English (Wang & Littlewood, 2021).

In multilingual classrooms such as those at Torphan Rojjanawich School, strategies including differentiated instruction, multimedia integration, and bilingual scaffolding play a crucial role in fostering equitable English learning outcomes. However, their effectiveness depends on context-sensitive implementation that aligns with learners' linguistic backgrounds and sociocultural experiences, rather than uniform application of generalized teaching models.

Given these complexities, the present study examines how English teachers at Torphan Rojjanawich School navigate the challenges of teaching in a linguistically diverse environment. Specifically, it aims to identify students' cognitive and linguistic barriers, analyze teachers' instructional strategies, and propose evidence-based recommendations for improving English language instruction in similar multilingual contexts.

Although many studies have explored English language teaching in multilingual settings, significant gaps remain in rural and border-area schools. Prior research has largely focused on urban contexts, while multilingual schools where English functions as a third or fourth language remain underexplored. Moreover, limited empirical attention has been given to teachers' classroom practices in addressing linguistic interference, limited exposure, and learner motivation simultaneously. This study addresses these gaps by offering a context-specific case study of Torphan Rojjanawich School, providing practical insights for multilingual English language teaching in resource-limited settings.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to examine the pedagogical challenges and strategies in teaching English to multilingual students at Torphan Rojjanawich School in Satun Province, Thailand. The qualitative case study method was chosen because it enables an in-depth exploration of complex educational phenomena within their real-life context. In this study, that context involves the intersection of language diversity, English language acquisition, and classroom teaching strategies in a secondary school setting. A single-site case study facilitates a nuanced understanding of the linguistic, cultural, and instructional variables influencing English language education in a multilingual environment. It further allows the researcher to investigate how teachers interpret and navigate these challenges in their day-to-day teaching practices while considering the lived experiences of their students. The focus on one institution enables detailed documentation of contextual factors unique to the setting, which may not emerge in broader survey-based research. Given the study's intention to explore perceptions, practices, and interactions in a holistic manner, the case study method is both appropriate and productive.

Participants in this study consisted of two primary groups: English language teachers and students at Torphan Rojjanawich School. Purposeful sampling was employed to ensure participants could offer relevant and meaningful insights into the research problem. A total of ten English language teachers were selected based on their experience teaching in linguistically diverse classrooms. These teachers had worked with students from a variety of linguistic backgrounds, including Thai, Malay, and local dialects, and represented a range of teaching tenures and professional backgrounds. Their collective experiences allowed the study to capture multiple perspectives on the practical realities of teaching English in a multilingual environment. In addition to the teachers, a sample of one hundred students from grades 7 to 12 was chosen to participate. The student sample was designed to reflect a wide range of linguistic and academic profiles. Students spoke various native languages,

including Thai and Malay, and presented differing levels of English language proficiency. This diversity ensured that the study captured a broad spectrum of student experiences with English language learning across different developmental stages.

Data were collected using three complementary methods: semi-structured interviews with teachers, student surveys, and classroom observations. The teacher interviews served as a primary source of qualitative data. Each of the ten participants was interviewed individually for approximately 45 to 60 minutes. The semi-structured interview format allowed for consistency in addressing core topics—such as perceived student difficulties, instructional adaptations, and reflections on strategy effectiveness—while also providing the flexibility to explore unexpected themes as they arose. Teachers were encouraged to elaborate on their personal experiences, including how they adapted curriculum and teaching methods to support students from different linguistic backgrounds. These interviews generated rich narrative data concerning classroom realities, challenges in communication, and teachers' ongoing pedagogical adjustments.

In parallel, a structured student survey was administered to the 100 selected students. The survey combined closed- and open-ended questions, providing both quantifiable data and qualitative insights into students' learning experiences. It focused on students' perceived challenges in learning English, their attitudes toward the subject, strategies they used to improve their skills, and their exposure to English outside the classroom. Students were also asked to reflect on whether their native language helped or hindered their acquisition of English, particularly in terms of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. The inclusion of open-ended items allowed students to express their views more freely, offering a complementary perspective to that provided by the teachers.

To further enrich the data, classroom observations were conducted in five different English classes over several weeks. Each class was observed multiple times to ensure

consistency and to capture a variety of teaching practices. The observations focused on classroom interactions, instructional strategies, student engagement, and the use of visual, bilingual, or digital resources to facilitate learning. Special attention was given to how teachers managed linguistic diversity—such as by code-switching, using translanguaging techniques, or providing scaffolding for less proficient learners. Observational field notes, as well as occasional audio and video recordings, were used to document these sessions for later analysis. These real-time observations allowed the researcher to cross-reference what teachers reported in interviews with what actually occurred in the classroom, thereby strengthening the validity of the findings.

Interview transcripts, survey responses, and classroom observation notes were analyzed using thematic analysis. The data were coded to identify recurring patterns and themes relevant to the research questions. The analysis began with an initial coding phase, during which the data were carefully reviewed to highlight significant phrases and concepts. These codes were then grouped into broader categories, such as “linguistic challenges,” “adaptive teaching strategies,” and “student motivation.” In the next stage, these categories were refined into thematic constructs that offered interpretive insight into the research problem. For instance, a recurring theme of “first language interference” emerged in both teacher and student responses, as did a shared recognition of the value of visual aids and peer collaboration as tools for overcoming language barriers.

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, triangulation was employed by comparing data across the three sources. For example, themes derived from teacher interviews were checked against student survey responses and corroborated by classroom observations. Any inconsistencies between reported and observed data were addressed through further review of the data. This triangulated approach allowed for a more balanced and holistic understanding of the

complex dynamics involved in English language instruction in a multilingual setting.

Ethical considerations were rigorously observed throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all adult participants, and for student participants, consent was secured from both the students and their legal guardians. Participants were assured that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential. Data were stored securely in encrypted digital files, accessible only to the researcher. All research protocols were reviewed and approved by an institutional ethics review board prior to the commencement of data collection.

In summary, this study employs a robust and contextually grounded qualitative methodology to examine the realities of teaching English in a multilingual secondary school. By integrating insights from multiple data sources and using a rigorous analytical framework, the research aims to generate actionable knowledge that can inform pedagogical practices in similarly diverse educational environments. The findings derived from this methodological approach are expected to contribute both to the academic literature on multilingual education and to practical strategies for improving English language instruction in multicultural classrooms.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Challenges Faced by Teachers

The findings from the teacher interviews revealed several major challenges encountered in teaching English to students from diverse linguistic backgrounds at Torphan Rojjanawich School. One of the most significant challenges was the disparity in students' English proficiency levels. Teachers reported that while some students demonstrated relatively strong English skills, others struggled with basic sentence construction and vocabulary. This wide proficiency gap made it difficult to design lessons that could effectively meet the needs of all learners. Consequently, higher-proficiency students were sometimes insufficiently challenged, whereas lower-proficiency students

risked falling behind, reducing overall classroom cohesion.

Another prominent challenge was language interference from students' native languages, particularly Malay and Thai. Teachers observed that Malay-speaking students frequently experienced difficulty with English verb tenses, as the tense system in English differs considerably from that of Malay. Students often struggled to distinguish between past, present, and future forms in English sentences. Similarly, Thai-speaking students faced challenges related to English word order and the use of prepositions due to structural differences between Thai and English. Such cross-linguistic interference resulted in recurring grammatical errors and confusion in both written and spoken English.

In addition, teachers highlighted students' limited exposure to English outside the classroom as a major constraint. Most students rarely encountered English in their daily lives, either through media, social interaction, or community activities. As a result, students had few opportunities to practice English authentically, which negatively affected vocabulary retention and the practical application of grammatical knowledge. This lack of exposure meant that students' receptive knowledge of English did not easily develop into productive language skills.

Student Challenges

Data from student questionnaires reflected similar challenges. One of the most frequently reported difficulties was limited vocabulary knowledge. Students from both Malay- and Thai-speaking backgrounds found it challenging to acquire new English vocabulary, particularly words without direct equivalents in their native languages. Vocabulary items with multiple meanings or those used in academic and technical contexts were especially problematic. These difficulties hindered students' ability to comprehend texts and express ideas effectively.

Students also reported significant challenges in reading comprehension. Difficulties were most apparent when students encountered abstract texts or content that was culturally unfamiliar. Idiomatic expressions and texts

unrelated to students' personal or cultural experiences often caused confusion, requiring repeated reading without fully understanding the main ideas. As a result, many students struggled to identify key information and infer meaning from English texts.

Another major issue identified was students' lack of confidence in using spoken English. Many students expressed feelings of anxiety, embarrassment, or fear of making mistakes when speaking English in front of peers or teachers. This lack of confidence led to reluctance in participating in classroom discussions and oral activities, limiting opportunities for meaningful language practice and slowing their overall language development.

Teaching Solutions Implemented by Teachers

To respond to these challenges, teachers at Torphan Rojjanawich School implemented several adaptive instructional strategies. One key approach was differentiated instruction, which aimed to accommodate students' varying proficiency levels. Teachers used a range of instructional materials, including simplified texts, visual aids, and multimedia resources such as videos and audio recordings. Visual materials helped lower-proficiency students grasp abstract concepts, while multimedia resources enhanced engagement and contextual understanding for all learners.

Peer learning was another strategy commonly employed. Teachers organized group work and peer tutoring activities that allowed more proficient students to support their classmates. This collaborative approach encouraged mutual learning, reinforced language knowledge, and created a supportive classroom atmosphere. Peer interaction also reduced students' anxiety and increased their willingness to practice English in a less threatening environment.

Teachers also emphasized cultural and contextual relevance in their instruction. Learning materials and classroom activities were designed to reflect students' local culture and real-life experiences. By connecting English learning to familiar contexts, teachers helped students

better understand the relevance of English and engage more meaningfully with the language.

Finally, bilingual support played a crucial role in facilitating comprehension. Teachers allowed students to use their native languages alongside English, particularly when learning new vocabulary or complex grammatical structures. Students were encouraged to discuss or explain concepts in their first language before expressing them in English. This strategy helped bridge linguistic gaps, clarified difficult concepts, and fostered a more inclusive and supportive learning environment.

The findings from this study reinforce the view that teaching English in multilingual classrooms constitutes a multidimensional challenge that extends beyond linguistic differences alone. In the context of Torphan Rojjanawich School, multilingualism intersects with limited instructional time, uneven access to learning resources, and restricted exposure to English in authentic communicative environments. These conditions intensify the cognitive demands placed on learners, particularly when English is acquired as a third or fourth language. Research on multilingual acquisition highlights that constant language switching and cross-linguistic interference can increase cognitive load, affecting processing speed, accuracy, and learners' confidence in language use (De Angelis, 2019; Kormos, 2017). This perspective helps explain why students in this study continued to experience persistent difficulties in grammar, vocabulary retention, and oral communication despite sustained classroom instruction.

From a sociocultural perspective, the findings align with contemporary interpretations of Vygotsky's theory, which emphasize that learning is mediated through interaction, tools, and social relationships within specific cultural contexts (Lantolf & Thorne, 2015). In multilingual classrooms, language functions simultaneously as both the medium and the object of mediation. Teachers at Torphan Rojjanawich School acted as linguistic mediators by scaffolding learning through strategic use of students' existing linguistic repertoires. This

practice reflects recent shifts in applied linguistics toward translanguaging and multilingual pedagogies, which conceptualize learners' languages as integrated and dynamic systems rather than separate, competing codes (García & Wei, 2018; Cenoz & Gorter, 2020).

The observed use of bilingual and multilingual support further supports empirical evidence showing that controlled use of students' first languages can enhance comprehension, reduce anxiety, and encourage active participation in English classrooms. Rather than hindering English acquisition, L1 use in this study functioned as a cognitive bridge that enabled learners to process complex ideas more effectively. These findings are consistent with Cummins' interdependence hypothesis, which posits that conceptual and literacy skills can transfer across languages when instructional conditions are supportive (Cummins, 2017).

Differentiated instruction also emerged as a key factor in addressing learner diversity. Flexible grouping, multimodal input, and task adaptation helped mitigate proficiency gaps and promoted more equitable participation among students with varying levels of English exposure (Tomlinson & Moon, 2016; Bondie et al., 2019). Differentiation in this study extended beyond instructional materials to include assessment practices and interactional patterns. Such responsiveness is increasingly recognized as essential in linguistically diverse classrooms, where uniform instructional approaches often disadvantage learners with limited proficiency or restricted exposure to the target language (OECD, 2019).

The integration of multimedia tools warrants particular attention. Beyond enhancing learner motivation, multimedia resources provided semi-authentic input that partially compensated for the limited presence of English in students' daily environments. Audiovisual materials supported vocabulary development, pronunciation awareness, and listening comprehension, enabling students to engage with English in more contextualized and meaningful ways (Webb & Nation, 2017; Saito & Hanzawa, 2018). In this sense, multimedia use extended

learning beyond textbook-based instruction and reduced reliance on decontextualized language input.

At a broader level, the findings challenge deficit-oriented views of multilingual learners and instead support asset-based perspectives that recognize linguistic diversity as a resource for learning (Flores & Rosa, 2019). Teachers' positive attitudes toward students' languages contributed to more inclusive classroom environments, which in turn enhanced learner motivation and engagement. This underscores the importance of teacher beliefs and professional preparation in multilingual pedagogy, alongside instructional techniques (Gao, 2021; Kubanyiova & Crookes, 2016).

Nevertheless, the study also reveals structural constraints that limit the impact of classroom-level interventions. Misalignment between national curriculum expectations and local linguistic realities remains a significant challenge in border-area schools. Similar tensions have been documented in other multilingual regions, where standardized language policies often fail to accommodate local language ecologies (Hamid et al., 2019; Macaro, 2018). Without institutional support, targeted teacher training, and policy flexibility, inclusive multilingual practices risk remaining isolated efforts rather than evolving into sustainable systemic change.

Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of evidence demonstrating that effective English teaching in multilingual settings requires pedagogical flexibility, linguistic inclusivity, and contextual sensitivity. By situating classroom practices within broader sociocultural and institutional frameworks, the findings advance a more holistic understanding of multilingual English language education and point toward more equitable and sustainable approaches for learners in rural and border-area contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that English language teaching at Torphan Rojjanawich

School takes place within a highly complex multilingual context where students' use of Thai and Malay significantly shapes their English learning processes. In response to the first research objective, the findings demonstrate that students face intertwined cognitive and linguistic barriers, including cross-linguistic interference, increased cognitive load, limited vocabulary retention, and low confidence in oral communication, particularly because English functions as a third or fourth language with minimal exposure beyond the classroom. Addressing the second objective, the study reveals that teachers employ a range of adaptive instructional strategies—such as differentiated instruction, bilingual and multilingual scaffolding, flexible grouping, and multimedia-supported learning—to mitigate these barriers and support diverse learner needs. These practices enable teachers to bridge proficiency gaps, enhance comprehension, and foster learner engagement despite resource and time constraints. In line with the third objective, the study recommends strengthening context-sensitive pedagogical approaches through sustained professional development in multilingual pedagogy, increased institutional support for flexible language use in classrooms, and the integration of semi-authentic English input to compensate for limited exposure. Overall, the findings underscore that effective English instruction in multilingual settings requires pedagogical flexibility, recognition of students' linguistic resources, and alignment between classroom practices and local sociolinguistic realities to promote more equitable and meaningful English learning outcomes.

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