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Exploring Reflective Competence of ELT Teachers as Translator-Mediators in Rural Indonesian Settings

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the reflective competence of English Language Teaching (ELT) teachers who function as translator-mediators in rural North Sumatera's settings. Grounded in Schön's (1983) Reflective Practice Theory, Neubert's (2000) Translation Competence Model, and Norton's (2013) Language Teacher Identity framework, the study is guided by four research questions: (1) How do ELT teachers in rural North Sumatera settings demonstrate reflection-in-action when performing translator-mediator functions during English language instruction? (2) How do ELT teachers engage in reflection-on-action concerning their use of Bahasa Indonesia as a mediation tool after instructional delivery? (3) How do rural ELT teachers construct their professional identity as translator-mediators? (4) What level of translational awareness do rural ELT teachers exhibit in their pedagogical practice, and what challenges do they encounter in mediating between English and Bahasa Indonesia? Employing a qualitative research design with open-ended questionnaires as the primary instrument, the study gathered data from three ELT teachers: a teacher serving multiple school levels in Bangun Purba, Deli Serdang, North Sumatra; a teacher serving multiple school levels in Rambutan, Tebing Tinggi, North Sumatra; and a Senior High School teacher in Sabu Barat, Sabu Raijua, East Nusa Tenggara. The findings reveal that all three teachers demonstrate meaningful reflection-in-action through adaptive code-switching guided by student comprehension needs, though the depth, structure, and systematicity of their reflective practices vary across participants. Reflection-on-action remains limited for most participants, largely due to the competing institutional demands of rural schooling, though one participant demonstrates a more deliberate post-lesson reflective practice. The teachers construct distinct yet complementary professional identities, ranging from relational bilingual companion to pedagogical mediator to language facilitator, all of which reflect contextually responsive approaches to the translator-mediator role. Translational awareness is evident across all participants, with shared attentiveness to meaning and context alongside culturally specific mediation challenges. The study concludes that rural ELT teachers possess substantial but under-supported reflective-mediating competence, and advocates for targeted professional development programs to strengthen this capacity.

Keywords: Reflective Competence, Translator-Mediator, ELT Teachers, Rural Indonesia, Teacher Identity

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INTRODUCTION

In multilingual environments such as Indonesia, English Language Teaching (ELT) teachers frequently assume roles that extend well beyond conventional language instruction. They function as translator-mediators, practitioners who actively broker meaning across linguistic and cultural boundaries in order to facilitate student comprehension (Hatim & Mason, 1990; Nord, 1997). This mediating function is particularly pronounced in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, where the use of students' first language (L1), Bahasa Indonesia, or local vernaculars is a common and often necessary pedagogical strategy for clarifying vocabulary, grammatical structures, and culturally embedded concepts. The capacity to perform this function effectively requires far more than bilingualism alone; it demands pragmatic sensitivity, cultural competence, and a sophisticated pedagogical skill set (PACTE, 2003; Neubert, 2000; Kelly, 2005).

Central to this study is the concept of reflective competence, derived from Schön's (1983) foundational work on the reflective practitioner. Schön proposed two interrelated forms of professional reflection: reflection-in-action, which refers to the capacity to think and adjust within the flow of practice, and reflection-on-action, which involves critical retrospective evaluation of one's decisions after the fact. Applied to the ELT context, reflective competence encompasses the teacher's ability to continuously and critically evaluate their pedagogical choices, including the strategic deployment of Bahasa Indonesia as a mediation tool, both during and after instructional delivery. Scholars in the field have demonstrated that teachers who engage systematically in reflection develop more nuanced and responsive pedagogical repertoires (Richards & Lockhart, 1994; Mann & Walsh, 2017), and that within the specific context of language mediation and code-switching, this reflective capacity is particularly critical, as teachers must make real-time decisions about when, how, and why to shift between languages in ways that serve both communicative and pedagogical goals (Turnbull & Dailey-O'Cain, 2009).

Neubert's (2000) Translation Competence Model provides a complementary theoretical lens, offering a multidimensional account of the capacities required for effective translation: linguistic competence, textual competence, subject competence, pragmatic competence, and transfer competence. While originally formulated for professional translators, this model has been productively extended to the ELT context, where teachers routinely perform translational acts as part of their instructional practice (Witte, 2011). The translator-mediator role, as elaborated by Bao and Besser (2020), acknowledges that language teachers occupy a unique position at the intersection of pedagogy and translation, neither purely teachers nor professional translators, but practitioners who draw on both knowledge bases to facilitate meaning-making in the classroom. This role demands what Witte (2011) terms translatorial competence: the capacity to recognize and navigate the cultural, pragmatic, and linguistic distances between languages in pedagogically productive ways, including knowing when direct translation is appropriate, when paraphrase or cultural adaptation is preferable, and when the absence of a perfect equivalent itself constitutes a valuable learning opportunity (Cook, 2010).

A third theoretical pillar is provided by Norton's (2013) framework of language teacher identity, which examines how teachers understand and position themselves in relation to the languages they teach and the communities they serve. Identity, in Norton's formulation, is not a fixed attribute but a dynamic, socially constructed, and often contested set of positionings that shift across contexts and relationships. For ELT teachers who also function as translator-mediators, questions of identity are particularly complex: they must navigate the ideological tension between the English-only norm prevalent in many professional discourses and the practical, often unavoidable, necessity of using Bahasa Indonesia in their classrooms. Research in rural and under-resourced contexts has shown that teachers' identity negotiations are shaped by institutional pressures, community expectations, and their own linguistic histories (Pennycook, 2017). Rural ELT teachers in North Sumatera, many of whom are themselves products of the same limited-resource environments they teach in, may construct hybrid professional identities that blend the roles of teacher, community language broker, and cultural mediator, identities that are rarely captured or validated by mainstream teacher education frameworks.

In rural North Sumatera's settings, these intersecting challenges take on a particularly acute character. Rural ELT teachers navigate complex sociolinguistic realities in which students' dominant languages are Bahasa Indonesia or local vernaculars such as Batak, Minang, or Javanese, and where English exists almost exclusively as a classroom phenomenon. Unlike their urban counterparts, rural ELT teachers frequently operate with limited access to professional development, instructional resources, and collegial networks that might otherwise support their growth as reflective practitioners (Pennycook, 2017). Despite these constraints, they are expected to serve as competent and deliberate mediators between the English language and their students' native linguistic and cultural frames of reference. The concept of the language teacher as a translator-mediator has attracted increasing scholarly attention in recent years (Witte, 2011; Bao & Besser, 2020), yet empirical research that specifically examines how rural North Sumatera's ELT teachers reflect on and enact this role remains sparse, leaving a significant gap in the literature that this study seeks to address.

This study addresses that gap by investigating the reflective competence of three ELT teachers across distinct rural North Sumatera settings, drawing on open-ended questionnaires anchored in the three complementary theoretical frameworks described above. The study is guided by four research questions: (1) How do ELT teachers in rural North Sumatera settings demonstrate reflection-in-action when performing translator-mediator functions during English language instruction? (2) How do ELT teachers engage in reflection-on-action concerning their use of Bahasa Indonesia as a mediation tool after instructional delivery? (3) How do rural ELT teachers construct and articulate their professional identity as translator-mediators? (4) What level of translational awareness do rural ELT teachers exhibit in their pedagogical practice, and what challenges do they encounter in mediating between English and Bahasa Indonesia? Theoretically, this study advances the integration of Schön's (1983), Neubert's (2000), and Norton's (2013) frameworks as a unified analytical lens for examining the reflective-mediating dimensions of ELT practice. Practically, its findings are intended to inform pre-service teacher education programs, in-service professional development initiatives, and policy frameworks designed to support rural ELT teachers in becoming more deliberate, confident, and competent translator-mediators.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design, consistent with the interpretive tradition in applied linguistics and teacher education research (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative inquiry is particularly suited to the aims of this study, as it allows for the in-depth exploration of individual experience, professional reflection, and identity construction in context-specific settings. Rather than seeking generalizable statistical patterns, this study aims to generate rich, contextually grounded insights into how ELT teachers in rural North Sumatera settings enact and reflect upon their translator-mediator roles.

Three participants took part in the study, all purposively selected on the basis that they meet the defining criteria for the study: practicing ELT teachers in rural North Sumatera settings who routinely perform translator-mediator functions in their instruction. The first participant is a teacher who serves multiple school levels in Bangun Purba, Deli Serdang, North Sumatra. The second participant is a teacher who serves multiple school levels in Rambutan, Tebing Tinggi, North Sumatra. The third participant is a Senior High School teacher in Sabu Barat, Sabu Raijua, East Nusa Tenggara. All three rural contexts are characterized by limited English language exposure outside the classroom and student populations whose dominant languages are Bahasa Indonesia and local vernaculars. The contrasting profiles of the three participants, differing in teaching level and geographic location, enable a cross-comparative analysis of reflective-mediating practice across distinct rural settings.

Data were collected through an open-ended questionnaire consisting of twenty-five items organized into six thematic sections: (A) demographic information, (B) reflection during teaching (reflection-in-action), (C) reflection after teaching (reflection-on-action), (D) professional identity as a translator-mediator, (E) translation awareness in teaching, and (F) reflective challenges in rural settings. The questionnaire was grounded in the three theoretical frameworks guiding this study, Schön's (1983) Reflective Practice Theory for Sections B and C, Norton's (2013) Language Teacher Identity framework for Section D, and Neubert's (2000) Translation Competence Model for Section E. Open-ended items were designed to elicit narrative, reflective responses rather than categorical or quantitative data, consistent with the qualitative orientation of the study.

Data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), involving a process of familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, construction of themes, and interpretive elaboration of findings. Responses were analyzed inductively, with themes emerging from the data rather than being imposed a priori. The analysis was organized around the four research questions and the corresponding theoretical frameworks, allowing the findings to be interpreted in relation to existing literature on reflective ELT practice, translation competence, and teacher identity. To maintain rigor and transparency, all interpretations are grounded in direct reference to the participants' responses, presented in paraphrased and summarized form. For the purposes of this study, participants are referred to by their institutional role and location rather than by name, in accordance with the study's commitment to participant confidentiality.

RESULTS

The findings are organized thematically across four dimensions corresponding to the study's research questions: reflection-in-action, reflection-on-action, professional identity as a translator-mediator, and translational awareness in rural settings. Each theme is drawn from all three participants' questionnaire responses and interpreted in relation to the theoretical frameworks guiding the study. Transcript summaries of the three teachers' responses across the key thematic sections are presented in Tables 1 through 5 below.

Table 1. Questionnaire Result: Section B – Reflection During Teaching (Reflection-in-Action)

Question	Teacher 1 (Multiple-level School, Bangun Purba, Deli Serdang)	Teacher 2 (Multiple-level School, Rambutan, Tebing Tinggi)	Teacher 3 (Senior High School, Sabu Barat, Sabu Raijua)
Switching to Bahasa Indonesia when students do not understand	Yes. She repeats the explanation in English twice first, then switches to Bahasa Indonesia if students still do not understand.	Yes. When teaching Recount Text, students were confused about text structure even after an English explanation. She re-explained orientation, events, and reorientation in Bahasa Indonesia, gave a simple example, and asked students to identify text parts together.	Yes. When teaching the difference between Active and Passive Voice to pre-intermediate 16-year-old learners, a student asked in Indonesian why the word 'broken' appeared in both forms. The teacher switched to Bahasa Indonesia to explain how English grammatical markers differ from the flexible word order of Indonesian.
Deciding when to use Bahasa Indonesia vs. English	She switches when she sees confusion on students' faces. Key factor: time efficiency, as unresolved confusion delays the lesson.	She starts in English for exposure, then switches based on students' facial expressions and responses. Factors: student understanding level, material difficulty, and available class time. Grammar and text structure are explained in Bahasa Indonesia; simple instructions remain in English.	He switches when a student appears stuck or confused. Primary factors: student comprehension levels, observed through student reactions, and task difficulty. Highly abstract or complex topics are introduced or summarized in Bahasa Indonesia to prevent mental fatigue.
Realising an in-class translation was incorrect	Yes. She corrects her mistakes immediately.	Yes. She re-explains the concept using simpler words or provides another example so students can understand better.	Yes. If the first explanation was too complex, he immediately switched to simpler language or used a visual aid to clarify the intended meaning, avoiding literal translations.
No perfect translation, handling in real time	Yes. She explains to students that the translation of a language depends on the context of the situation.	Yes, especially with certain expressions or cultural meanings. She explains the meaning rather than translating word by word.	Yes. Some English concepts do not exist in Indonesian culture and are adapted to something similar. For example, 'privacy' has no single direct word in Indonesian, often requiring phrases

			such as hak untuk sendiri or ruang pribadi.

Table 2. Questionnaire Result: Section C – Reflection After Teaching (Reflection-on-Action)

Question	Teacher 1 (Multiple-level School, Bangun Purba, Deli Serdang)	Teacher 2 (Multiple-level School, Rambutan, Tebing Tinggi)	Teacher 3 (Senior High School, Sabu Barat, Sabu Raijua)
Thinking back on Bahasa Indonesia use after lessons	Sometimes, but not usually, because she moves to another class immediately.	Yes. She reflects on whether Bahasa Indonesia helped students understand better, and considers whether she used it too much or could have explained more in English. This informs planning for the next lesson.	Yes. He reflects on whether the language used was appropriate for the situation, including considering whether switching between formal Indonesian and slang or regional dialects was suitable.
Teaching journal or lesson notes	No.	No formal journal, but she sometimes writes short notes reflecting on which parts of the lesson worked well and which parts were difficult for students.	Yes, he keeps a teaching journal, but does not write specifically about his use of translation or L1 in class.
Discussing Bahasa Indonesia use with colleagues	Yes. The conversation was about how students can increase vocabulary so they can translate sentences more quickly.	Not specifically. General teaching matters are discussed, but rarely the use of Bahasa Indonesia in English class. She decides her approach based on her own experience and student needs.	Yes. Discussions commonly focus on balancing maximum English exposure with the need for comprehension, and on how to use Bahasa Indonesia strategically as a tool rather than a crutch.
Change in approach over the past year	Yes, her approach to using Bahasa Indonesia has changed.	Yes. Previously used English approximately 85% and Bahasa Indonesia 15%. Gradually adjusted to approximately 60% English and 40% Bahasa Indonesia after observing that some students still struggled with mostly-English explanations.	Yes. He has found that using Bahasa Indonesia helps bridge the gap in understanding complex material that might otherwise confuse students if explained entirely in English.

Table 3. Questionnaire Result: Section D – Professional Identity as a Translator-Mediator

Question	Teacher 1 (Multiple-level School, Bangun Purba, Deli Serdang)	Teacher 2 (Multiple-level School, Rambutan, Tebing Tinggi)	Teacher 3 (Senior High School, Sabu Barat, Sabu Raijua)
How the teacher describes their classroom role	She describes her role as a friend, specifically a friend in two languages, emphasising the relational	Primarily an English teacher, while simultaneously acting as a mediator who bridges English and Bahasa	Primarily a mediator between two languages and a facilitator of learning, rather than a human dictionary or

	quality of her mediating practice.	Indonesia so students can access material more easily.	straightforward translator. His most effective role is to bridge the gap between students' native language and English, fostering comprehension and independent language production.
View on English-only instruction in rural contexts	Not necessary. English skill levels among rural students are not the same as those in cities.	Good in theory for maximising exposure, but difficult to apply completely in rural contexts where students have limited vocabulary and limited daily exposure to English.	Forcing an English-only policy can increase language anxiety, lower motivation, and cause students to disengage, particularly in rural areas where students may not see the immediate benefits of English.
Change in view of using Bahasa Indonesia since first teaching	Yes, because students' proficiency has increased over time.	Yes. Initially believed English should be used as much as possible. Teaching experience revealed that strategic use of Bahasa Indonesia helps students understand difficult concepts more quickly.	Yes. He has found that a mix of both languages creates a more relaxed classroom atmosphere, encouraging greater student participation.
Confidence or anxiety when translating	Confident, because of the strong communicative bond she has built with her students.	Generally confident. Slightly unsure when a concept has no exact Bahasa Indonesia equivalent; in those cases, she explains through examples or simple descriptions rather than translating word for word.	Confident, particularly when students understand the concept and engage more deeply to seek further knowledge.

Table 4. Questionnaire Result: Section E – Translation Awareness in Teaching

Question	**Teacher 1 (Multiple-level School, Bangun Purba, Deli Serdang)**	**Teacher 2 (Multiple-level School, Rambutan, Tebing Tinggi)**	**Teacher 3 (Senior High School, Sabu Barat, Sabu Raijua)**
What the teacher pays most attention to when translating	Words and meaning.	Meaning rather than word-by-word translation. Main goal is to ensure students understand the message or idea being explained.	Meaning and context over literal word-for-word translation, to ensure comprehension and natural expression.
Example of cultural difficulty in translation	During a Q&A session, a student could not answer because the questioner read the question with a strong tribal accent, disrupting communicative intelligibility.	Idiomatic expressions. Some expressions sound strange or confusing if translated word by word into Bahasa Indonesia. She explains the meaning and gives a real-use example.	The simile 'as white as snow.' In a tropical country like Indonesia, where snow is unfamiliar, seputih salju is often replaced with seputih kapas (as white as cotton) in idiomatic usage,

			reflecting how ecological and environmental factors shape language.
Students' use of translation tools	Students use dictionaries. She considers this appropriate as dictionaries are a part of language learning.	Students sometimes use Google Translate, but she does not allow reliance on it for tasks. She encourages dictionary use and guides students through constructing sentences from looked-up vocabulary.	He focuses on clarity and intent. If a translation is imperfect but the meaning is clear, he responds to the core idea. If the translation obscures meaning, he asks for clarification or offers corrected phrasing in the target language to support learning.

Table 5. Questionnaire Result: Section F – Reflective Challenges in Rural Settings

Question	**Teacher 1 (Multiple-level School, Bangun Purba, Deli Serdang)**	**Teacher 2 (Multiple-level School, Rambutan, Tebing Tinggi)**	**Teacher 3 (Senior High School, Sabu Barat, Sabu Raijua)**
Biggest challenges in rural ELT	English is still considered foreign and very difficult in rural areas.	Students rarely use English outside the classroom. Most communicate in Bahasa Indonesia or a local language daily, limiting vocabulary and exposure to English.	Multiple challenges: insufficient time, low student concentration, student confusion when English is used in the learning process, and limited vocabulary.
Access to professional development	None.	Limited. Occasional workshops or teacher meetings occur, but these do not specifically focus on translation or reflective teaching.	Some opportunities exist, including online reflective teaching and mediation training. Reflective teaching has been the most beneficial, as it provides a structured way to evaluate performance and cultivates a growth mindset.
Advice to a new rural ELT teacher	Use English as often as possible so that students become accustomed to it.	Use English as much as possible for exposure, but do not be afraid to use Bahasa Indonesia when students need clarification. Use it strategically for complex concepts, and gradually increase English use as students grow more familiar with the language.	Use Bahasa Indonesia strategically rather than habitually to maintain an English-rich environment while ensuring no student is left behind. It serves as a vital pedagogical bridge in rural contexts where students have limited English exposure and predominantly use local dialects.

Reflection-in-Action

All three participants demonstrate clear and purposeful patterns of reflection-in-action in their translator-mediator practice, though their mediation strategies differ in structure, trigger, and complexity. The teacher from a multiple-level school in Bangun Purba, Deli Serdang employs a structured mediation sequence: repeating target language input twice in English before switching to Bahasa Indonesia. The primary trigger for her code-switching is her real-time reading of student affect and comprehension, specifically the visible confusion on her students' faces. Her decision-making is additionally governed by time efficiency, a pragmatic awareness that unresolved comprehension difficulties consume instructional time and impede lesson progression.

The teacher from a multiple-level school in Rambutan, Tebing Tinggi demonstrates a similarly responsive but more explicitly multi-factor approach: she begins each lesson in English to maximize student exposure, then switches to Bahasa Indonesia when facial expressions or responses indicate confusion. She explicitly weighs student understanding level, material difficulty, and available time, defaulting to Bahasa Indonesia for complex topics such as grammar rules and text structure while keeping simpler instructions in English. The Senior High School teacher from Sabu Barat, Sabu Raijua, East Nusa Tenggara introduces a further dimension, describing how he switches language in response to both comprehension breakdown and the cognitive demands of abstract content, using Bahasa Indonesia to prevent what he terms mental fatigue when introducing particularly complex concepts. His account of explaining Active and Passive Voice, where a student conflated the structural logic of English with the more flexible word order of Indonesian, illustrates the depth of linguistic and grammatical mediation that rural ELT contexts may demand. Across all three participants, instances of in-the-moment self-correction when their own Bahasa Indonesia explanations prove imprecise are evident, a behavior consistent with Schön's (1983) description of reflection-in-action as an iterative, self-regulating process of monitoring and adjusting within practice.

Reflection-on-Action

The participants' engagement in reflection-on-action differs notably in frequency, depth, and form across the three cases. The teacher from Bangun Purba, Deli Serdang acknowledges sometimes thinking back on her use of Bahasa Indonesia after a lesson, but identifies the structural demands of her timetable, specifically the need to move immediately between multiple classes, as the primary constraint on sustained post-lesson reflection. She does not maintain a teaching journal. She does, however, engage in informal collegial dialogue about language mediation, having discussed with colleagues how to build students' vocabulary to support faster sentence translation.

The teacher from Rambutan, Tebing Tinggi demonstrates a more deliberate, if still informal, approach. She regularly reflects after lessons on whether her use of Bahasa Indonesia was proportionate and effective, and on whether she could have explained more in English. She sometimes writes brief notes capturing which parts of lessons worked well and which were difficult for students, and she has tracked a measurable shift in her language use ratio over time, from approximately 85% English and 15% Bahasa Indonesia at the start of her career to approximately 60% English and 40% Bahasa Indonesia following sustained observation of student needs. This trajectory reflects what Farrell (2015) identifies as evidence-informed adjustment characteristic of developing reflective practitioners. The Senior High School teacher from Sabu Barat, Sabu Raijua maintains a teaching journal, though he does not document his use of translation or L1 specifically within it. He does, however, reflect on the appropriateness of his language choices after class, and engages in substantive collegial discussions about strategic versus habitual use of Bahasa Indonesia in English lessons, demonstrating the most developed reflective community of any participant in the study.

Professional Identity as a Translator-Mediator

The three participants construct markedly distinct yet theoretically complementary professional identities, each of which reveals a different dimension of what it means to be a translator-mediator in rural North Sumatera's ELT contexts. The teacher from a multiple-level school in Bangun Purba, Deli Serdang articulates a strikingly relational identity: she describes herself as a friend, a friend in two languages. This self-positioning foregrounds the affective dimension of language mediation, locating effective bilingual practice within a relationship of trust and mutual ease between teacher and

student. Her confidence in translation and mediation is explicitly anchored in this relational bond, rather than in technical linguistic competence alone.

The teacher from a multiple-level school in Rambutan, Tebing Tinggi positions herself primarily as an English teacher who simultaneously performs a bridging function, connecting English and Bahasa Indonesia to help students access material more easily. Her identity is more pedagogically oriented, grounded in strategic judgment about when and how to deploy each language. The Senior High School teacher from Sabu Barat, Sabu Raijua articulates the most explicitly theorized identity, describing himself as a mediator between two languages and a facilitator of learning, rather than a straightforward translator or a human dictionary. He distinguishes clearly between translation as a mechanical act and mediation as a generative pedagogical process, positioning his role as one of fostering comprehension and independent language production. All three participants reject the English-only instructional norm as unsuitable for rural contexts, citing students' limited daily English exposure, higher language anxiety, and the risk of disengagement as justifications for bilingual instructional approaches. In Norton's (2013) terms, each participant invests in a distinct subject position that enables effective mediating practice: the relational companion, the strategic bridge-builder, and the facilitative mediator.

Translational Awareness in Rural Settings

All three participants demonstrate meaningful translational awareness, with a shared orientation toward meaning-centered rather than word-for-word translation, and with varying degrees of sensitivity to pragmatic, cultural, and sociolinguistic dimensions. The teacher from Bangun Purba, Deli Serdang reports attending primarily to words and meaning, reflecting what Neubert (2000) describes as linguistic and textual competence. Her cultural and pragmatic awareness is illustrated by a classroom incident in which a student was unable to answer a question because the questioner used a strong tribal accent, disrupting communicative intelligibility. This incident highlights the layered sociolinguistic mediation demands unique to rural multilingual settings, where teachers must navigate not only the gap between English and Bahasa Indonesia but also between standard Indonesian and local linguistic varieties.

The teacher from Rambutan, Tebing Tinggi demonstrates a strong meaning-centered translational orientation, explicitly prioritizing the message over the word. Her pragmatic awareness is illustrated by her handling of idiomatic expressions, which she approaches through contextual explanation and real-use examples rather than direct translation. The Senior High School teacher from Sabu Barat, Sabu Raijua displays the most explicitly articulated translational awareness of the three participants, foregrounding both meaning and cultural context as priorities in his translational practice. His account of adapting the simile "as white as snow" into the ecologically grounded Indonesian equivalent "as white as cotton" demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of how environmental and cultural factors shape the semantic range of language. His approach to student-generated translation tools is similarly nuanced: rather than accepting or rejecting the output of such tools categorically, he attends to communicative intent, correcting translations only when meaning is genuinely obscured. Across all three participants, little to no access to formal professional development in translation, mediation, or reflective teaching is reported, confirming that the reflective and translational competence evidenced in their practice has been developed through accumulated experience rather than institutional support.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study offer substantive insights into the reflective-mediating practices of three rural North Sumatera's ELT teachers, with implications that extend to broader questions about teacher competence, professional identity, and the conditions that enable or constrain reflective practice in under-resourced educational contexts.

Across all three participants, the adaptive code-switching behaviors documented in the findings exemplify what Schön (1983) describes as the artistry of professional practice: the capacity to respond intelligently and responsively to the irreducible complexity of lived instructional situations. Whether through the structured repetition-before-switching sequence of the Bangun Purba teacher, the multi-factor judgment of the Rambutan teacher, or the cognitively scaffolded approach to

preventing mental fatigue employed by the Sabu Raijua teacher, all three demonstrate forms of reflection-in-action that have been developed through classroom experience rather than formal reflective training. This confirms Mann and Walsh's (2017) observation that experienced teachers develop tacit reflective competencies that are embedded in practice rather than in explicit professional discourse, and challenges any deficit-oriented view of rural teachers as unreflective or underprepared practitioners.

The variation in reflection-on-action across the three participants is particularly instructive. The most constrained post-lesson reflection, reported by the Bangun Purba teacher, is directly attributable to the structural conditions of her multiple-level timetable, which leaves minimal time between classes for sustained retrospective analysis. The more developed reflective practice of the Rambutan teacher, including her note-taking and tracked language-use adjustments, suggests that even modest structural affordances can meaningfully support the development of reflection-on-action. The Sabu Raijua teacher's maintenance of a teaching journal and participation in collegial discussion about language strategy represents the most institutionally supported reflective practice in the study, though it remains informal and unsystematic. Taken together, the three cases suggest that reflection-on-action in rural ELT contexts is not absent but structurally constrained, and that small, context-sensitive interventions, such as brief structured peer conversations, audio-recorded lesson summaries, or mobile-based reflective prompts, could meaningfully increase its frequency and depth (Pennycook, 2017; Farrell, 2015).

The three identity constructions documented in this study contribute meaningfully to Norton's (2013) framework of language teacher identity by demonstrating that the translator-mediator role is not a singular, uniform professional position but a range of contextually negotiated subject positions, each of which enables effective bilingual mediation through a different logic. The relational companion identity of the Bangun Purba teacher, the strategic bridge-builder identity of the Rambutan teacher, and the facilitative mediator identity of the Sabu Raijua teacher all represent legitimate and effective positionings within the translator-mediator role. This finding resonates with Bao and Besser's (2020) argument that translator-mediators must cultivate not only linguistic and translational competence but also interpersonal and relational competencies, and suggests that teacher education frameworks should make space for diverse identity positions rather than prescribing a single model of the translator-mediator.

The translational awareness exhibited across the three participants reflects a shared commitment to meaning-centered, contextually sensitive mediation, consistent with Neubert's (2000) account of translation competence as a multidimensional constellation of subcompetencies. The culturally specific challenges documented, including the tribal accent disruption in Bangun Purba, the idiomatic translation difficulties in Rambutan, and the ecological adaptation of similes in Sabu Raijua, collectively illustrate the sociolinguistic and cultural depth of the translator-mediator role in rural North Sumatera's settings. These challenges are not incidental but constitutive of the mediation task in such contexts, and they constitute a compelling argument for professional development programs that are designed with explicit attention to the local sociolinguistic and cultural realities of rural North Sumatera's classrooms. Taken together, the findings reinforce three principal implications for policy and practice: rural ELT teachers possess meaningful reflective-mediating competence that deserves recognition rather than remediation; professional development must be structurally sensitive to the constraints of rural schooling; and teacher education programs should explicitly address the translator-mediator role as a core dimension of ELT professional competence, particularly for those who will serve in multilingual, under-resourced settings.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore the reflective competence of three ELT teachers functioning as translator-mediators in distinct rural North Sumatera's settings, drawing on Schön's (1983) Reflective Practice Theory, Neubert's (2000) Translation Competence Model, and Norton's (2013) Language Teacher Identity framework. The findings reveal three practitioners who demonstrate genuine and adaptive reflection-in-action, limited yet structurally constrained reflection-on-action, diverse and

contextually responsive professional identities, and meaningful translational awareness, all developed largely without formal support or training.

At the same time, the study highlights the structural constraints that limit reflection-on-action in rural teaching contexts, and the significant gap in professional development provision for rural ELT teachers across North Sumatera. The participants' accounts collectively make clear that effective translator-mediation in rural classrooms is not an incidental or informal practice but a complex, reflective professional competence that deserves institutional recognition, theoretical elaboration, and sustained practical support.

This study is subject to limitations. The use of three participants drawn from self-report questionnaire data constrains the generalizability of the findings, and the reliance on participants' perceptions means that directly observed classroom practice remains outside the scope of the study. Future research should incorporate larger and more geographically diverse samples, classroom observation data, and longitudinal engagement to build a more comprehensive picture of reflective-mediating practice in rural North Sumatera's ELT contexts. Nonetheless, as a qualitative multi-site study, this investigation offers a theoretically grounded and empirically substantiated contribution to an underexplored area of ELT scholarship, and it opens productive avenues for further inquiry into the reflective competence of teacher-translators in multilingual, under-resourced educational settings.

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