

TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON L1 USE IN ENGLISH CLASSES AT A UNIVERSITY LANGUAGE CENTER

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ABSTRACT

A number of studies have revealed that English teachers perceive the use of first language (L1) in English classrooms as beneficial. However, most of these studies concentrated on high school teachers and teacher educators who typically follow a government-mandated curriculum and are constrained by limited instructional hours for English. Consequently, there is a need for further exploration in other educational contexts, such as university language centers, where teachers often have greater flexibility in designing their curriculum and tend to conduct more intensive English instruction. This study aimed to examine English teachers' perspectives of the use of L1 in English classrooms within the context of a university language center. The participants included 15 English teachers from the language center of a public university in Indonesia. Using questionnaires and interviews, this study revealed that while the majority of teachers believed English should be used as much as possible in the classroom, they also acknowledged the important role of L1 in enhancing the teaching and learning process. Specifically, the most common purposes for using L1 included checking students' comprehension, explaining grammatical concepts, introducing new vocabulary, and creating supportive atmosphere for students in the classroom.

Keywords: English Classroom, English Teacher's Perception, First Language (L1)

A. INTRODUCTION

The role of the first language (L1) in second language (L2) classrooms continues to spark debate among language researchers and theorists. Some scholars maintain that the use of students' L1 should be entirely eliminated from L2 instruction (Richards & Rodgers, 2001), with others even viewing it as an obstacle to effective L2 learning (Forman, 2016). However, this strict avoidance of L1 is increasingly regarded as an outdated approach (Hall & Cook, 2013). In fact, the integration of students' L1 into English classrooms has gained wider acceptance, supported by several well-established learning theories, including scaffolding within sociocultural theory, schema theory, cognitive load theory, Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, and translanguaging theory. Scaffolding explains how L1 helps learners reach beyond their current capabilities. The concept of scaffolding (Hamidi & Bagherzadeh, 2018), rooted in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, argues that learning occurs most effectively in the "zone of proximal development" (ZPD)—the gap between what learners

can do independently and what they can achieve with support (Vygotsky, 1978) . In this context, L1 acts as a scaffold that helps learners reach higher levels of understanding and performance.

Building on this idea, schema theory demonstrates how the L1 activates learners' prior knowledge, facilitating comprehension of new concepts (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011). Schema theory, from cognitive psychology, posits that learners comprehend new information by activating prior knowledge or "schemata." Language learners bring with them a rich base of knowledge, ideas, and experiences that are encoded in their L1. Activating this prior knowledge through the L1 can facilitate comprehension of new L2 input. Cognitive Load Theory offers further insight into why strategic use of the L1 can enhance L2 learning (Nawal, 2018). Cognitive Load Theory highlights L1's role in reducing processing demands. Cognitive Load Theory suggests that learners have a limited amount of working memory available for processing new information. When the cognitive demand of a task exceeds this capacity, learning can be hindered. In the EFL/ESL classroom, exclusive use of L2 may overload learners—especially beginners—by requiring them to simultaneously decode instructions, process new vocabulary, and understand unfamiliar grammar.

Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis highlights another important dimension: learners' emotional readiness to acquire a second language. Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982) which argues that emotional variables—such as anxiety, motivation, and confidence—affect second language acquisition. A high affective filter (e.g., fear, nervousness) blocks input from being processed effectively. L1 use can help lower the affective filter, particularly among beginners who may feel overwhelmed or intimidated in an English-only classroom. When students are permitted to use their L1 occasionally, they are often more willing to take risks, ask questions, and participate in class discussions. L1 provides a psychological safety net, fostering a positive and inclusive learning environment where learners feel understood and supported.

Translanguaging theory offers a modern perspective on integrating L1 as part of a fluid, learner-centered approach (García & Wei, 2015). Emerging from bilingual education, translanguaging theory views language use as dynamic and fluid. Instead of seeing L1 and L2 as separate systems, translanguaging allows students to draw on their entire linguistic repertoire to make meaning, express ideas, and participate fully in learning. Teachers who engage in translanguaging might allow students to brainstorm in L1, draft outlines in L1, and then produce final products in L2. This theory reframes L1 use as not merely a tool for translation, but a resource for deeper thinking and meaning-making, which aligns with constructivist views of learning. Rather than viewing L1 as a hindrance, these theories collectively support its strategic and thoughtful integration into the language learning process.

In fact, several studies indicate that both educators and learners are in favor of incorporating the first language (L1) in second language (L2) classrooms. For instance, Bruen & Kelly, (2017) reported that L1 use in the classroom could reduce learner's anxiety and cognitive overload. Likewise, Edstrom, (2006) discovered that although he was firmly dedicated to using only the target language while teaching Spanish, he found it difficult to completely eliminate L1 from his instruction. In Indonesian context, Widyasari, (2018) investigated vocational teacher's perspectives of the use of L1 in English classroom. The study found

that teachers viewed L1 as useful for explaining classroom discipline, technical vocabulary, and giving instructions. The teachers were also aware of the risk of overuse, put forwarding a balanced-approach. A number of current research also showed similar findings. Abid (2020) examined Indonesian EFL teacher educators' views on utilizing L1 in L2 classrooms. The study found that L1 is seen as a pedagogical tool, especially for abstract or culturally loaded concepts; in speaking classes, they prefer maximizing L2 exposure; L1 use should be selective and purposeful. Sundari and Febriyanti (2021) explored teachers' practices and perspectives of the use of L1 in EFL classroom. The study concluded that L1 appeared during the teaching but not overused. In addition, teachers employed L1 mostly for activity objectives, activity instruction, comprehension check, and translation. The study also showed that most of teachers mixed L1 and English with different proportions. Meanwhile, the others decided to employ a small portion English. Only few teachers consistently strived to use English for the most part of the learning. Perdani (2021) investigated English teachers' perspective of the use of L1 in their class and reason of using it. He found that teachers generally advocated L1 use (Bahasa Indonesia) when needed, particularly for explaining grammar, vocabulary, and giving instructions. The study also found teachers agreed it should be employed selectively, to avoid overdependence and to support English exposure. Furthermore, Nanda et al., (2024) explored Indonesian senior high school teachers' perspectives of using L1 in English teaching. Varying views were evident in the study where some advocated for minimal use, others for optimal use. These different views resulted from a number of factors such as students' English proficiency and task complexity. The study also showed that L1 was specifically employed for teaching grammar, vocabulary, and giving instructions.

Previous studies have provided valuable insights into how English teachers perceive the use of the first language (L1) in the classroom. However, most of these studies have focused on high school teachers and teacher educators who typically follow a government-mandated curriculum and are constrained by limited instructional hours for English. As a result, there is a need for further exploration involving other educational settings, such as university language centers, where teachers often have greater flexibility in designing their curriculum and conduct more intensive English classes. This present study aims to address this gap by exploring the following research questions:

1. What are university language center teachers' perceptions of using L1 (Bahasa Indonesia) in their classrooms?
2. In what situations and for what reasons do these teachers make use of the L1 in teaching English?

B. METHOD

This study employed a mixed-methods design that combined quantitative and qualitative approaches (Cresswell, 2009) to gain a comprehensive understanding of teachers' views on the use of English and the first language (L1) in English language classrooms. The participants were fifteen English teachers (10 women and 5 men) from the language center of a public university in Indonesia. All of them share Indonesian as their first language (L1). These participants were recruited voluntarily. Among the group, 10 teachers hold a master's degree in TESOL, while the remaining 5 have a bachelor's degree in TESOL. In terms of teaching experience, 8 teachers have taught for more than five years, whereas 7 have less than five years of experience. The language center where they work offers English training programs at levels from beginner to intermediate, catering to both students and staff of the university.

Data for this study were collected using a questionnaire (closed-ended) and a semi-structured interview. The questions for both instruments were adapted from Manara's (2007) research, which explored similar issues within the Indonesian context. The questionnaire comprised three sections. The first section gathered demographic information such as age, gender, first language, highest educational qualification, and teaching experience. The second section contained eight items that investigated teachers' perceptions regarding the use of the first language (Bahasa Indonesia) in the English classroom. Specifically, the first three items addressed teachers' views on the use of English as the medium of communication in the classroom. The following three items focused on perceptions of first language use, while the final two items related to the use of bilingual materials and dictionaries (Indonesian-English or English-Indonesian). Participants responded to these items using a four-point Likert scale ranging from 4 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree). The last section asked participants about the purposes and frequency of their first language use, with responses recorded on a four-point Likert scale from 4 (always) to 1 (never). The closed-ended questionnaire was distributed online via google form and remained accessible for one week, from September 10 to 17, 2024. Before distributing the questionnaire, the researcher approached potential teachers through email, Facebook, and WhatsApp to obtain their consent to participate in the study. Once they agreed, they were directed to the questionnaire website and asked to complete it.

After the participants completed the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews were conducted via WhatsApp Messenger's online chat application. The interview included seven questions designed to clarify participants' views on first language use and to obtain detailed information about their L1 practices. Three participants were selected voluntarily to take part in the interviews. The researcher and each participant mutually agreed on a suitable time to conduct the interview, which lasted between 10 and 15 minutes per participant. The data obtained from both instruments were then subjected to appropriate analysis, with quantitative techniques applied to the questionnaire results and qualitative procedures employed for the interview responses. A basic statistical analysis of the questionnaire data was performed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 30.0. This analysis specifically calculated the percentage of participants who agreed with each item. While, the interview data were analyzed qualitatively (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initially, the responses were thoroughly reviewed to identify segments where participants explained their views on L1 use in English teaching. Then, these segments were organized into themes to further interpret and support the teachers' perspectives expressed in the closed-ended questionnaire.

C. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Following the analysis of questionnaire and interview data, the findings are presented under themes aligned with the research questions. Each theme combines quantitative results, expressed as response percentages, with qualitative excerpts that provide context and depth. These findings are interpreted in relation to established theories and prior research to highlight their significance.

Participant's views of English use in teaching English

This section presents the participants' views regarding the role of English in classroom communication, highlighting their opinions on both teacher and student language use. To provide a clearer picture of how teachers perceive the role of English in classroom interaction, their responses are summarized in Figure 1.

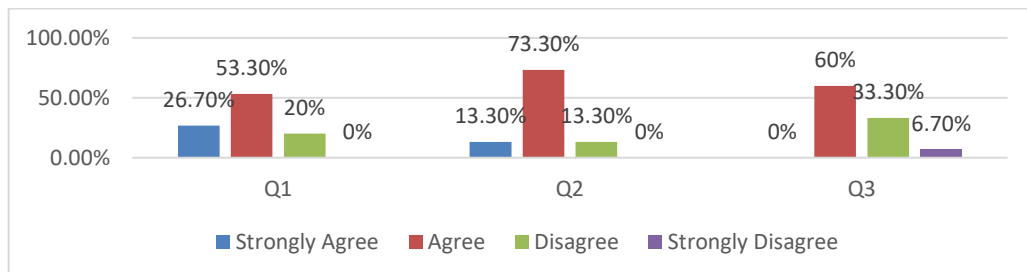


Figure 1. Teacher's views of English use in the classroom

Regarding the use of English in the classroom, Figure 1 illustrates that most teachers believe students should communicate in English with both their teachers and peers. Specifically, 80% of the teachers agreed or strongly agreed that students ought to use English when interacting with their teacher (Q1), while 86.7% supported the idea that students should consistently use English with their classmates (Q2). Interestingly, only a slight majority (60%) agreed that teachers themselves should use English exclusively throughout the entire teaching process (Q3). These findings suggest that although most teachers endorse maximizing English use in the classroom, they still allow for some use of the first language during instruction. The interview data reinforced the teachers' perceptions, emphasizing their belief in the necessity of maximizing learners' exposure to English. Teacher 1 commented, "By using only English, they become accustomed to the language, which motivates them to learn through practice." Similarly, Teacher 2 remarked, "Encouraging learners to speak English continuously helps them develop the habit of using the language." These views may be shaped by the status of English in Indonesia as a foreign language. Consequently, teachers may regard the use of English in the classroom as the most effective way for students to develop exposure and practice.

Teacher's views of the use of L1 in the classroom

To examine how teachers perceive the role of the first language (L1) in supporting English instruction, their views are presented in Figure 2.

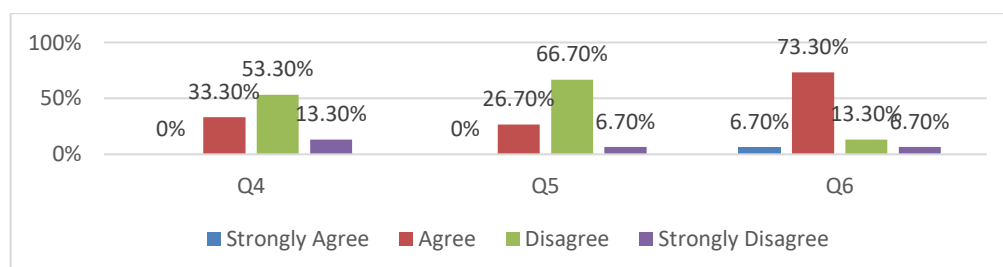


Figure 2. Teacher's views of L1 use in English classroom

In relation to L1 use, the participants generally recognized its potential benefits. Figure 2 indicates that most teachers (66.6%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that the use of L1 impedes English learning (Q4). In light of their earlier responses to questions 1, 2, and 3, this suggests that while teachers believe English should be used as much as

possible, they also acknowledge that L1 can support the teaching and learning process. This positive perception of L1's role is further reflected in the high level of agreement (80%) with Q6, where teachers concurred that comparing L1 and English helps learners. Additionally, most teachers (70%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that students always expect explanations in their L1 when it is used in class (Q5), implying that students also want extensive exposure to English, although this does not mean L1 should be completely excluded. The interviews reflected similar perspectives, with teachers identifying two main factors that influenced their use of L1: students' proficiency levels and the difficulty of the material. According to Teacher 1, L1 is beneficial because English, as a foreign language, can be challenging for some learners, particularly those at the beginner level, and it is helpful when addressing complex content. Teacher 2 similarly noted that L1 ensures clarity of instructions for beginners and is used to facilitate students' understanding when dealing with challenging concepts.

Teacher's views of the incorporation of bilingual material and bilingual dictionary.

To explore teachers' perspectives on the role of L1 beyond classroom interaction, their views on the use of bilingual materials and dictionaries are summarized in Figure 3.

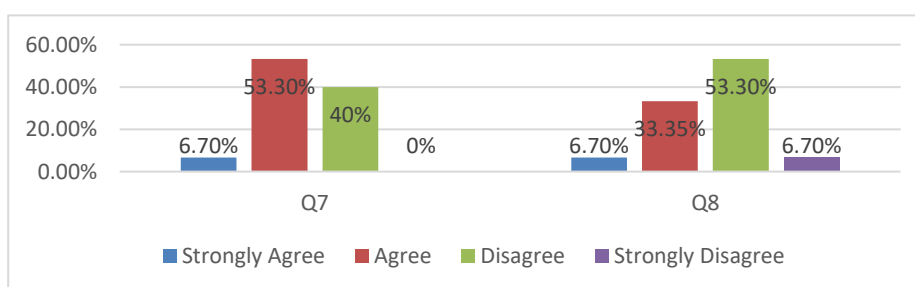


Figure 3. Teachers' views of the incorporation of bilingual material and dictionary

With respect to classroom materials, Figure 3 shows that most teachers (60%) agreed or strongly agreed that students benefit more from bilingual resources, such as handouts and textbooks (Q7). This finding implies that L1 supports learning not only orally but also through written materials. However, when it comes to dictionary use, most teachers (60%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that students benefit more from using bilingual dictionaries (Q8). Despite this general reluctance to recommend bilingual dictionaries, interview responses reveal that there is still some support for their use, particularly for beginner-level students. Teacher 1 commented, "Bilingual dictionaries are helpful for beginners to understand and find unknown words, but I only recommend them for students at the beginner level." Similarly, Teacher 3 noted, "Bilingual dictionaries can provide an initial understanding of English words, after which monolingual dictionaries can be used to grasp word usage in context."

Teacher's reasons for employing bahasa Indonesia

Despite the emphasis on English, teachers often employ Bahasa Indonesia for various pedagogical and affective purposes. Table 1 summarizes their reasons for using L1 in classroom practice.

Table 1. Teacher's Use of Bahasa Indonesia

Roles	Always	Often	Rarely	Never
Delivering Instructions		20%	73.3%	6.7%
Providing learners with feedback		20%	66.7%	13.3%
Verifying learner's comprehension		53.3%	40%	6.7%
Introducing new words		46.7%	53.3%	
Clarifying grammar points	13.3%	40%	46.7%	
Supporting students' comfort in learning		46.7%	53.3%	
Delivering tests, quizzes, and assignments		33.3%	53.3%	13.3%
Conveying administrative details		40%	46.7%	13.3%

Table 1 illustrates teachers employed the first language for a variety of goals and with varying frequencies. Only one to two out of the 15 teachers (6.7% to 13.3%) reported that they *never* used L1 for giving instructions, providing feedback to learners, checking comprehension, helping students feel more comfortable in the classroom, discussing assignments, tests, and quizzes, or explaining administrative information. This finding indicates that L1 plays an important role in the teaching process, despite many teachers believing that English should be the only language used for communication and instruction (see Figure 1). The most common purposes for using L1 were to check students' understanding (53.3%), explain grammar (53.3%), introduce new vocabulary (46.7%), and create a more comfortable classroom atmosphere (46.7%). Interview data further reinforced these findings. For example, Teacher (1) stated, "I often use L1 to explain new words and expressions, as well as to stimulate students' interest, engage with humors, and facilitate ice-breaking activities." Likewise, Teacher (3) noted, "I tend to use L1 to clarify English expressions that cannot be directly translated into Indonesian."

The findings of the present study align with those of previous research, such as Ferrer (2005), who found that the majority of English teachers surveyed viewed the use of L1 as both unavoidable and beneficial. Similarly, Edstrom (2006) reported that although she aimed to use the target language exclusively in her Spanish class, she still relied on L1—particularly for explaining grammar and checking comprehension. In the same vein, Manara (2007) observed that even teachers who supported monolingual instruction frequently resorted to L1 in practice. Al-Amir (2017) also found that while Saudi teachers expressed a preference for exclusive use of English, they acknowledged the practicality of L1 in classroom settings.

These patterns are consistent with the present study's findings, even though it was conducted in a university language center where teachers had more flexibility in curriculum design and instructional approach. Despite the increased opportunity for immersive English use, teachers in this context reported using L1 for many of the same functions: explaining complex grammar points, clarifying technical vocabulary, managing instructions, and checking comprehension. Widyasari (2018) found that L1 as effective for ensuring clarity, especially for students with varied proficiency levels. Abid (2020) and Perdani (2021) emphasized the pedagogical value of L1 while maintaining that it should be employed selectively to preserve students' exposure to English. Similar to the findings of Sundari and Febriyanti (2021), teachers demonstrated varying degrees of reliance on L1, influenced by learner needs, task demands, and instructional goals. Some took a more bilingual approach, while others minimized L1 use but still acknowledged its occasional necessity. Interestingly, the freedom associated with the language center setting did not eliminate L1 use; rather, it allowed teachers to exercise greater professional judgment in determining when and how to

use it strategically. This suggests that L1 use is driven more by pedagogical reasoning than by institutional constraints. Additional research further supports these insights. Bozorgian and Fallahpour (2015) observed in Iranian EFL classrooms that teachers used L1 in limited but purposeful ways—primarily to scaffold instruction and facilitate comprehension—confirming your study's observation that L1 can be a concise yet effective instructional aid. Razavi et al.,(2023) demonstrated that L1-mediated metacognitive strategies significantly improved Iranian EFL learners' listening performance, metacognitive awareness, and motivation—highlighting that L1 use can support higher-order cognitive and motivational outcomes even in advanced learning contexts.

Beyond aligning with prior empirical studies, these findings can also be understood through several established theoretical perspectives. From a sociocultural standpoint, L1 functions as a mediational and cognitive tool that supports learners in constructing L2 knowledge (Vygotsky, 1986; Leung, 2005). This is evident in how teachers used L1 for grammar explanation and comprehension checks—moments that require high cognitive effort. Similarly, Schema Theory underscores the importance of activating prior knowledge, which is often encoded in learners' first language. Teachers' use of L1 to introduce new topics or explain culturally relevant content helped students connect new material to familiar schemata, thus enhancing comprehension.

Affective and cognitive dimensions of learning also help explain the value of L1. According to Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1985), emotional factors such as anxiety and confidence influence language acquisition. Teachers in this study observed that using L1 created a more supportive environment and lowered students' anxiety, which encouraged participation. This aligns with findings by Levine (2003), who argued that learners feel more confident when they know they can fall back on their L1 if needed. Cognitive Load Theory further illuminates the role of L1 in easing instructional burden (Macaro, 2009). When the cognitive demand of a task exceeds learners' working memory capacity—especially among beginners—exclusive use of L2 may hinder understanding. The use of L1 at critical moments, such as during task explanation or grammar instruction, helps reduce extraneous cognitive load, allowing students to focus more effectively on learning new content.

Moreover, the findings resonate with the principles of translanguaging theory (García & Wei, 2014), which views language use as flexible and integrated rather than compartmentalized. Teachers in the study used both L1 and L2 fluidly, drawing on students' full linguistic repertoire to facilitate meaning-making. L1 was used in pre-task discussions, for vocabulary comparisons, or to explore abstract ideas, while L2 remained the focus for communicative practice and output. This approach reflects a constructivist view of learning, where students use all available resources to deepen understanding and engage critically with content. Taken together, these findings reinforce the argument that selective and purposeful use of L1 in the L2 classroom can support both linguistic and cognitive development. Even in a flexible, immersive setting like a university language center, L1 remains a pedagogical asset rather than an obstacle—one that, when used judiciously, enhances clarity, reduces anxiety, supports task performance, and builds deeper learner engagement.

D. CONCLUSION

This study has explored English teachers' perspectives and practices regarding the use of the first language (L1) in a university language center—an instructional context characterized by greater curricular flexibility and more intensive English learning. Despite having the freedom to immerse students in English, teachers reported using L1 selectively to fulfill important pedagogical functions, such as explaining complex grammar, clarifying instructions, introducing culturally loaded vocabulary, and managing classroom interactions. These findings are consistent with previous research conducted in more regulated environments, suggesting that L1 use is driven less by institutional policy and more by professional judgment and instructional needs. The study contributes to the growing body of research that challenges the monolingual ideology in English language teaching and instead supports a more nuanced, context-sensitive approach to L1 use. The findings reinforce theoretical perspectives that position L1 as a cognitive, affective, and sociocultural resource—one that can facilitate comprehension, reduce cognitive load, lower learner anxiety, and promote deeper engagement with L2 content. Importantly, the study highlights the potential of L1 as a legitimate pedagogical tool even in settings where maximizing English exposure is an explicit goal. Teachers in the language center exercised their agency to make strategic decisions about when and how to incorporate L1, often guided by learners' proficiency levels, task complexity, and instructional clarity. This underscores the need for teacher education programs to provide guidance on principled L1 use, rather than enforcing rigid language separation. While the study provides valuable insights, it is limited by its focus on a single institutional context. Future research could expand to include learners' perspectives on L1 use, explore classroom discourse in real time, or compare practices across different types of language programs. Such studies could offer a more comprehensive understanding of how L1 functions as a pedagogical resource in diverse English language teaching settings.

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