



USING MOTHER TONGUE IN EFL CLASSROOMS: PROS AND CONS

Pipit Sri Mularsih^{*1}, Erlin Satyarini², Faisal³
^{1,2,3}Universitas Muhammadiyah Purwokerto

Article Info

Article history:

Published : 15/09/2024

Keywords:

English learning,
EFL Classrooms,
L1 Use,
mother tongue,
pros and cons

ABSTRACT

The use of the mother tongue (L1) in teaching a foreign language is a controversial topic. While some researchers claim that L1 should not be used in foreign language classrooms, others think that it makes a valuable contribution to the learning process. The purpose of this study is to investigate the pros and cons of using the mother tongue in EFL classrooms. Literature review is conducted in this study to discuss the pros and cons of using mother tongue (L1) in EFL classrooms, particularly in Indonesia. Finding supportive books as well as previous studies related to the advantages and disadvantages of using L1 in EFL classrooms. Finding books and previous studies related to the use of L1 in EFL classrooms is conducted to figure out what are the advantages and disadvantages of using L1. English-mainly is generally a better rule of thumb than English-only, but overall acceptance of L1 use in English classrooms is no better than a complete ban. Too often-using the L1 that can guide to a dependency on it is arguably a more crucial problem. Moreover, finding the best way on how and when L1 is used appropriately in EFL classrooms will be another task for EFL teachers.

Corresponding Author:

Pipit Sri Mularsih,
Program Studi Magister Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris
Universitas Muhammadiyah Purwokerto,
Jl. KH. Ahmad Dahlan, Po. Box. 202 Purwokerto, Banyumas, Indonesia.
E-mail: pipitsrimularsih@ump.ac.id

How to Cite:

Mularsih.P.S., & Satyarini.E., (202X). Using Mother Tongue in EFL Classrooms: Pros and Cons. Khazanah Pendidikan-Jurnal Ilmiah Kependidikan (JIK), 18 (2), 467-473.



1. Introduction

Using mother tongue or L1 in EFL classrooms is still a debatable topic. When and how to use it is not clearly defined. Moreover, learning EFL is different from English as a second language (ESL). It requires more intensive exposure and daily use. Unfortunately, in the country which has EFL, there is no need to use English outside the classroom - it is restricted in time and place (Ibrahim, 2018). Experts and researchers argued that more use of English in the classroom is proven to improve the exposure of L2 better than not to do so. It promotes more language inputs and develops inter-language when teachers provide more English spoken in the classroom (Semiun, Taka & Nalley, 2014).

However, because of the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) which is mostly used in EFL classrooms, bilingualism is considered the best way to teach English where mother tongue is emphasized to explain the target language (Mahmud, 2018). Plenty of reasons have been figured out by the researchers after conducting interviews as well as questionnaires to answer whether or not mother tongue usage in EFL classrooms is beneficial.

The researchers and books are still ongoing finding the best ways and time when L1 is used in EFL classrooms. The age, proficiency level, background, as well as the reasons why EFL students learn English are the considerations in using L1 in EFL classrooms. Some teachers seem to be helped by the use of L1 when teaching EFL in the classrooms, while some others think it has a bad impact on the L2 learning process.

2. Method

Literature review is conducted in this study to discuss the pros and cons of using mother tongue (L1) in EFL classrooms, particularly in Indonesia. Finding supportive books as well as previous studies related to the advantages and disadvantages of using L1 in EFL classrooms.

3. Results And Discussion

3.1 The Benefits of Using Mother Tongue (L1) in EFL Classrooms

The learning process target must be achieved through a series of well-planned activities. However, challenges are always present to be evaluated at the end of each learning activity. These challenges make the teachers decide to use L1 in learning English. Thus, it is considered a good thing to allow students to use their native language in English. Abolishing the use of L1 appears to be pointless since the use of L1 serves many functions in learning the target language, in contexts where English is learned as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL). The advantages can be elaborated as follows:

3.2 Time-saving in EFL Classrooms

Implementation of L1 can be beneficial in EFL classes, by providing that the teachers are acquainted with its use effectively. From the teachers' perspective, explaining the material in English fully might be time-consuming, since the students might not understand the teachers' explanation thoroughly. Kerr (2019) states that L1 is also more frequently used in larger classes where teachers feel it is more effective in developing a good classroom atmosphere and maintaining discipline. Giving instructions to young learners can be confusing, so using L1 to explain clears up any confusion learners might have. Teachers should teach basic commands when first starting class but, sometimes students forget, and in that case, it is more efficient to use L1. The explanation of grammar concepts, vocabulary, and expressions is much easier and quicker to explain if we have the translation handy. For example, if students understand the concept of an adjective, it is much simpler to translate the word "adjective" than to describe it in English. In addition, Tanrıseven & Kırkgöz (2021) mention using L1 can save time and enhance understanding in ESL/EFL classrooms. Time saved by sorting things quickly in L1 is time that can later be used for more productive activities. There are ways around this, like an inductive

approach where the teachers give students examples and allow them to establish the theory. However, it all depends on what we believe to be the right approach. Atkinson (1987) in Mahmutoglu & Kicir (2013) explains how to provide extensive knowledge on where to use L1 in language classrooms, by: 1. Eliciting language (all levels); 2. Checking comprehension (all levels); 3. Giving instructions (early levels); 4. Cooperation among learners; 5. Discussions of classroom methodology (early levels); 6. Presentations, and reinforcement of language (mainly early levels); 7. Checking for sense; and also 8. Testing.

3.2 Boosting Confidence and Reducing Anxiety

Although teachers try the best way to separate L1 and English, students consciously or unconsciously try to link the two languages because L1 always comes to their minds. In general, some teachers think that it is necessary to start an English class through L1 to give them safety and ease their fear of *using* English. As delivered by Krashen (1985) in Turin (2017), it is mentioned that there is an emotional barrier that prevents learners from acquiring any input from the environment. It may be caused by a negative perspective towards language, lack of motivation, or unstable emotional or physical circumstances. Moreover, Kerr (2019) states that on the whole, teachers make much greater use of the L1 with classes of students at lower levels because it can help to improve motivation and alleviate frustration.

They think that the L1 can be beneficial to give students a sense of safety because insufficient language mastery may create apprehension among students in English class. From this students' perspective, if they *are* comfortable in the class, it is easier for them to be involved in various class activities because reducing anxiety and increasing students' self-confidence is essential. In other words, if they feel safe and comfortable in the classroom, they will be less anxious and more confident to express their answer. If teachers apply English-only rules, they might feel threatened and are afraid to speak because there might be consequences of saying L1 in the classrooms.

In younger EFL classrooms, using L1 as the medium of instruction is suggested. It is proven to increase their motivation to learn EFL and to support their performance better than using English-only rules. Yadav (2014) emphasizes if children are forced to switch abruptly or transition too soon from learning in their mother tongue to schooling in a second language, their first language acquisition may be weakened or even lost. Even more importantly, their self-confidence as learners and their interest in what they are learning may decline, leading to lack of motivation, school failure, and early school drop-out. Therefore, it is not suggested to have English-only rules in younger EFL classrooms.

3.3 Helping Students to Get English Input

Another reason why EFL teachers should allow L1 in EFL classrooms is that students make a conscious link between their native language and English. Undeniably, L1 is a significant resource in second language acquisition. Turin (2017) states the mother tongue should be used to provoke discussion and speculation, to develop clarity and flexibility of thinking, and to help teachers increase their own and *our* student's awareness of the inevitable interaction between L1 and English that occurs during any type of language acquisition.

When both L1 and English are allowed for discussions, meaningful communication and participation will be longer. In illustration, if *students* do not have any English background before coming to their first EFL classroom then teachers explain it in English-only, they will feel difficult to understand the material. It will be different if the teachers explain it in their L1, they will understand it better. Previous studies conducted by Carson and Cashihara (2012) in Yenice (2018) found 305 of the first and the second Japanese university students preferred L1 to be used in EFL classrooms and generally considered the use of L1 in EFL classrooms to be helpful in the L2 learning *process*.

In addition, most students may remain silent due to their lack of English proficiency or having anxiety when the teachers ask them to discuss or say something only in English. To

illustrate, teachers can use this technique to enrich our students. Teachers can ask students what the equivalent of a word or expression is in their L1. Once they answer, another student in class might not have known they learned something new. Finally, from the teachers' perspective, *communicating* with students in their L1 seems to improve student-teacher communication. They see the teacher as an ally or someone to help them. Teachers are the ideal language model used. It adds a bit of mystery when students hear their teachers, who came from another place, speak their language.

Yenice (2018) in *his* study mention that the present study found out that the teachers used L1 in their classes for instructional functions,

managerial functions, affective functions, and social functions. While some functions of L1, such as explaining grammar or translating new vocabulary, were found to be frequently used, the others, for *example*, making the meaning clearer or greeting the students, seemed to be rarely used.

4. The Drawbacks of Using L1 in EFL Classrooms

Teaching EFL (L2) in Indonesia has different strategies from teaching L1. English has different grammar, pronunciation, and other linguistic aspects if it is compared with Bahasa Indonesia. Most teachers find difficulties in explaining all material with the conversation in the classrooms if it is done by using English thoroughly. Hence, they have strategies to use L1 to minimize students' confusion when they use L1 in their classrooms and other reasons as they claimed to be the benefits of using L1 in EFL classrooms. Despite the benefits aforementioned before, the undeniable disadvantages will be elaborated as follows:

4.1 Less Comprehensible Input

Challenges must be overcome by the EFL teachers because Indonesian EFL learners have a lack of listening to English input. In addition, as delivered by Krashen (1985) in Hoque (2017), it is mentioned that comprehensible input, the route to acquisition and information about grammar in the target language, is automatically available when the input is understood. The evidence is the silent period during this period, learners are presumably building up their competence in the target language by listening. In other words, the silent period is the first phase of EFL students to get their basic knowledge of English as their L2. They observe and later they will imitate *what* they listened to. Therefore, to facilitate their basic knowledge, it is suggested to start with the English classroom language spoken by the teachers, it will make students get used to listening to English.

Hanáková and Metruk (2017) underline that the more students have exposure to English, the more rapidly they learn it. Additionally, the importance of using English by the EFL teachers is to provide exposure for input on the parts of the students. In other words, the more often teachers use *English* the more they provide English input (Semiun, Taka & Nalley, 2014; Mahmud, 2018). *Furthermore*, teachers may provide other listening audio to support listening inputs for their students, such as from podcasts, news, songs, films, videos, and others.

4.2 Less development of target language

EFL learners have many purposes for learning English, such as to master speaking, writing, TOEFL or TOEIC preparation, or general English as it is taught in formal school. Because of these different purposes, teachers should consider wisely what approach should be used in teaching English. However, it is undeniable that English as a language is a tool to communicate. Thus, Kerr (2019) states English is best taught through English alone, without the mediation of the L1, can be traced to the beginning of the 20th century when there was a rapid development of private language schools for adults, who wanted to learn a language for practical, rather than academic, reasons. In line with Kerr, Phillipson (1992) in Mahmutoglu and Kicir (2013) explains the reasons for using only English in language classrooms by giving the five

principles as indicated below: 1. English is the best-taught mono-lingual; 2. The ideal teacher of English is a native speaker; 3. The earlier English is taught, the better the result; 4. The more English is taught, the better the result. 5. If other languages are used too much, standards of English will drop. From those points of view, target language must be achieved and it is not necessary to mix it with L1.

4.3 Less practice of target language

Another disadvantage of using L1 in EFL classrooms is that the use of L2 is getting less. English is better taught in the EFL classroom not only to explain the rules and language but also to communicate between teachers and students (Almoayidi, 2018). In line with that, Kiftiah (2019) also states teachers' language refers to interactional and transactional languages. Small talk or short conversation is the *sample* of interactional language, while transactional language is when there is a process of giving and receiving information. There are many ways to promote using English either in classroom instructions or classroom language, those are: 1. identifying similarities and differences, 2. summarizing and note-taking, 3. reinforcing effort and providing recognition, 4. homework and practice, 5. nonlinguistic representations, 6. cooperative learning, 7. setting objectives and providing feedback, 8. generating and testing hypotheses, questions, cues, and advance organizers.

4.4 Less confidence in using the target language

Grammar-Translation method is mostly used by EFL teachers in order to focus on grammar rules rather than for communication purposes. The original purpose of it is actually to reduce stress and anxiety, and to boost students' confidence in learning English. However, the impact is making students more comfortable in using their mother tongue rather than boosting their confidence in using English. *Therefore*, starting to use spoken English by the teachers, it will be the model for students to imitate what their teachers do. By doing so, students will figure out the real reasons to use English for communication, e.g. in giving instruction, getting information from the students, asking for something, and others (Břenková, 2007).

Furthermore, teachers also had better encourage students to speak in English rather than in their mother tongue. Hue (2010) suggests some ways to encourage EFL students to speak English such as: 1. Reducing the task of difficulty, 2. Giving more time for students to do the task, 3. Giving the tasks within students' experience, 4. Allowing students to do the tasks in pair/group, 5. Providing students with task *guidance*, 6. Being aware of students' needs and abilities, 7. Promoting positive attitudes among students, 8. Change students' negative beliefs and attitudes towards mistakes, 9. Boosting student's self-confidence, 10. Making the classrooms is not a threatening place.

4.5 Being Too Dependent to L1

It might be helpful if L1 usage is allowed in the first EFL classrooms, particularly to explain grammar and new vocabulary, moreover for the students who do not have sufficient English basic knowledge. However, if it is done all the time, students will be too dependent on using L1 rather than be encouraged in using English. Even though they know what they want to say in English, they prefer to say it in their L1. Previous studies proved that overusing L1 in EFL classrooms has a bad impact and makes *the* students too dependent on their L1 (Fernández, 2015; Mahmutoğlu & Kicir, 2013). They emphasize some of the bad impacts, such as 1. Teachers and students begin to feel they do not "really" understand the meaning until it is translated, 2. The teachers and/or the students fail to observe the distinctions between equivalence of form, semantic equivalence, and pragmatic features, and thus oversimplify to the point of using crude and inaccurate translation, 3. Students speak to the teacher in L1 as a matter of course, even when they are quite capable of expressing what they mean, 4. Students fail to realize that during many activities in the classroom it is essential that they use only English".

5. Conclusions

In brief, the use of L1 in EFL classrooms must be well-planned. Considering the students' age, background, proficiency level, is a must to make sure English terminal objectives are achieved. Whether it is for young learners (TEYL), general English, speaking or conversation class, TOEFL or TOEIC preparations, or English for Special Purposes (ESP), the medium of instruction must be planned wisely. English language teaching is merely supposed to be teaching English through English is the best way to do it. It would be wise, however, not to get too carried away. English-mainly is generally a better rule of thumb than English-only, but overall acceptance of L1 use in English classrooms is no better than a complete ban. Too often-using the L1 that can guide to a dependency on it is arguably a more crucial problem. The question of how much using L1 and what kind is appropriate in any teaching context can be answered only with careful deliberation of that context by the teacher. This deliberation will need to be informed by a clear understanding of the relative advantages and disadvantages of L1 use.

6. References

- Almoayidi, K.A. (2018) The Effectiveness of Using L1 in Second Language Classrooms: A Controversial Issue. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 4, pp. 375-379, April 2018
DOI:<http://dx.doi.org/10.17507/tpls.0804.02> <https://www.academypublication.com/issu-es2/tpls/vol08/04/02.pdf>
- Břenková, R. (2007). "Teacher's Usage of The Mother Tongue Versus English at the Level of Young Learners". MASARYK UNIVERSITY IN BRNO Faculty of Education Department of English Language and Literature. Retrieved from:
[https://is.muni.cz/th/u2119/Teacher s Usage of the Mother Tongue versus English at the Level of Young Learners.pdf](https://is.muni.cz/th/u2119/Teacher_s_Usage_of_the_Mother_Tongue_versus_English_at_the_Level_of_Young_Learners.pdf)
- Fernández, R.F.F. (2015). The Effects of L1 Overuse in L2 Learning: Evidence from Three Case Studies. *IJAEDU- International E-Journal of Advances in Education*, Vol. I, Issue 3, December 2015. Available from: <http://ijaedu.ocerintjournals.org/tr/download/article-file/225647>
- Hanáková, M. & Metruk, R. (2017) The Use of L1 in the Process of Teaching English. *Modern Journal of Language Teaching Methods (MJLTM)* Vol.7, Issue.8, August (2017) 208–216. Retrieved from:
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/318826935 The Use of L1 in the Process of Teaching English](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/318826935_The_Use_of_L1_in_the_Process_of_Teaching_English)
- Hue, N.M. (2010). "Encouraging Reluctant ESL/EFL Learners to Speak in the Classroom". Retrieved from: <http://iteslj.org/Techniques/HueReluctantSpeakers.html>.

- https://www.researchgate.net/publication/259558835_Encouraging_reluctant_ESLEFL_learners_to_speak_in_the_classroom
- Hoque, E. (2017). An Introduction to the Second Language Acquisition. Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/335690866_An_Introduction_to_the_Second_Language_Acquisition [accessed Jan 09 2022].
- Kerr, P. (2019). The use of L1 in English language teaching. *Part of the Cambridge Papers in ELT series*. [pdf] Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Kiftiah, S. (2019). "Teachers' Strategies in Giving Explanation in EFL Classroom". Retrieved from: <http://eprints.unm.ac.id/16083/1/Siti%20Kiftiah-Article.pdf>
- Mahmud, S. (2018). Should Teachers Use L1 in EFL Classroom? *Journal of NELTA*, Vol 23 No. 1-2, December 2018
- Mahmutoğlu, H. and Kicir, Z. (2013). The Use of Mother Tongue in EFL Classrooms. *EUL Journal of Social Sciences (IV:1) LAÜ Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi June 2013 Haziran*. Retrieved from: <http://euljss.eul.edu.tr/si44.pdf>
- Semiun, A., Taka, S.D. & Nalley, H. (2014). The Importance of The Use of English by EFL Teachers Viewed from The Theories of Language Learning, Language Teaching, and Classroom Interaction. *JIPB*, Vol.1, No.03, September 2014. Retrieved from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328262352_The_Importance_of_the_Use_of_English_by_EFL_Teachers_Viewed_from_the_Theories_of_Language_Learning_Language_Teaching_and_Classroom_Interaction
- Tanriseven, U. & Kirkgöz, Y. (2021), "An Investigation into the Teachers' Use of L1 in EFL Classes", <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1315466.pdf> (accessed 5.1.2022).
- Turin, T. A. (2017), "Usefulness of Using Mother Tongue in Foreign Language Classroom" <https://www.eajournals.org/wp-content/uploads/Usefulness-of-Using-Mother-Tongue-in-Foreign-Language-Classroom.pdf> (accessed 3.1.2022).
- Yadav, K.M. (2014). Role of Mother Tongue in Second Language Learning. Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/283355564_Role_of_Mother_Tongue_in_Second_Language_Learning [accessed Jan 12 2022].
- Yenice, Z.E. (2018). The Use of L1 in EFL Classrooms in the Context of Turkey. Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325253968_The_Use_of_L1_in_EFL_Classrooms_in_the_Context_of_Turkey [accessed Jan 12 2022].