

## THE ROLE OF FIRST LANGUAGE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE INSTRUCTIONS

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**Annotation.** *This study examines L1 use among 17 university English learners. Results show 85%+ students use their native language for complex grammar (47.1%) and academic vocabulary (35.3%). The findings suggest L1 acts as a strategic cognitive bridge, facilitating deeper classroom comprehension.*

**Keywords:** *L1 integration, ELT, cognitive scaffolding, university learners.*

### Introduction

English has become the dominant language of international communication, education, business, science, and digital interaction. Across the world, millions of learners study English to access better educational opportunities and improve their professional prospects. Because of this global importance, English language teaching (ELT) has developed various methodologies aimed at maximizing learners' exposure to the target language. For many decades, one of the most widely accepted principles in language classrooms was the English-only approach, which discouraged or even prohibited the use of learners' first language (L1).

However, real classroom experience tells a more complex story. Learners do not enter the classroom as empty vessels; they bring with them a fully developed linguistic system — their first language — which shapes how they understand, process, and produce new information. Ignoring this linguistic resource may not always be pedagogically effective. In fact, a growing body of research suggests that the first language can serve as a valuable cognitive and instructional tool when used strategically and purposefully (Auerbach, 1993; Cook, 2001).

Research indicates that L1 can facilitate comprehension of difficult grammar structures, abstract vocabulary, and complex instructions, especially for beginner and lower-intermediate learners (Macaro, 2001). When teachers briefly switch to the students' native language to clarify meaning, it can prevent misunderstanding and save valuable classroom time. Moreover, L1 use can reduce learner anxiety and create a more inclusive classroom environment. Studies show that students often feel more confident and less afraid of making mistakes when occasional L1 support is allowed (Brooks-Lewis, 2009). This emotional aspect of learning is important because anxiety has been shown to negatively affect second language acquisition.

From a cognitive perspective, the first language plays a natural role in second language development. According to Cook (2001), bilingual learners do not separate their languages completely in their minds; rather, both languages interact dynamically. Therefore, carefully guided comparisons between L1 and English can increase learners' metalinguistic awareness and help them understand similarities and differences in grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary. Butzkamm and Caldwell (2009) further argue

that the mother tongue can function as a bridge to the foreign language, accelerating understanding instead of hindering it.

At the same time, researchers caution that excessive reliance on L1 may reduce exposure to English and limit opportunities for meaningful communication practice (Nation, 2003). For this reason, many scholars emphasize judicious or principled use of L1 rather than unrestricted translation. The key issue is not whether L1 should be used at all, but how, when, and for what purposes it should be integrated into English language instruction (Macaro, 2005).

In modern multilingual classrooms, especially in contexts where students have limited contact with English outside school, the strategic use of L1 can provide scaffolding that supports deeper understanding. Therefore, examining the role of the first language in English instruction is essential for developing balanced pedagogical approaches that recognize both the importance of English exposure and the value of learners' existing linguistic knowledge.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

##### English Language Teaching and Learning (ELT/L)

English language teaching and learning (ELT/L) has evolved significantly over the past decades. Various terms such as ESL (English as a Second Language), EFL (English as a Foreign Language), ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages), TESOL, TEFL, and TESL reflect different contexts and approaches to English instruction. While these acronyms emphasize either the teaching or learning dimension, this study adopts the broader term English Language Teaching and Learning (ELT/L) to encompass both perspectives, particularly for learners whose first language is not English (Margana, 2016).

Historically, ELT methodologies have shifted from grammar-translation methods to communicative and task-based approaches. The Grammar-Translation Method relied heavily on the learners' first language, while the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) movement emphasized maximum exposure to the target language and often discouraged L1 use (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). As a result, many classrooms adopted an "English-only" philosophy, assuming that excluding the first language would accelerate acquisition.

However, practical classroom realities and empirical research have increasingly challenged this strict monolingual assumption.

##### Theoretical Perspectives on the Role of First Language

The debate about L1 use in ELT/L is deeply rooted in second language acquisition (SLA) theory. Early behaviorist approaches viewed the first language primarily as a source of interference. Errors were believed to result from negative transfer from L1 to L2. However, later cognitive and sociocultural perspectives presented a more nuanced understanding.

Cook (2001) introduced the concept of multicompetence, arguing that bilingual learners do not possess two completely separate language systems. Instead, both languages coexist and interact within one cognitive system. From this perspective, L1 is not a barrier but a resource that shapes L2 learning.

Similarly, Cummins (2007) proposed the theory of Common Underlying Proficiency, suggesting that knowledge and skills acquired in the first language can transfer to the second language. For example, literacy skills developed in L1 may

support reading comprehension in English. This interdependence hypothesis supports the idea that strengthening L1 does not weaken L2; rather, it can facilitate it.

Sociocultural theory also highlights the mediating role of language in learning. From Vygotskian perspectives, L1 can serve as a cognitive tool that helps learners scaffold new knowledge and regulate their thinking during L2 tasks (Lantolf, 2000). In classroom practice, this may appear as code-switching, peer discussion in L1, or internal translation processes. Pedagogical Functions of L1 in ELT Classrooms

Empirical research has identified several pedagogical functions of L1 use in English classrooms.

Auerbach (1993) argued that strategic L1 use can improve comprehension, clarify grammar explanations, and create a more democratic classroom environment. Macaro (2001) found that teachers often switch to L1 to explain complex concepts, manage discipline, or ensure task understanding.

In vocabulary instruction, L1 equivalents can provide efficient meaning clarification, especially for abstract words (Nation, 2003). Rather than lengthy explanations in English, a brief translation can save time and reduce misunderstanding.

Beyond cognitive support, emotional factors also play a crucial role. Brooks-Lewis (2009) found that students reported feeling more confident and less anxious when limited L1 use was permitted. Fear of making mistakes in English can reduce participation; therefore, occasional L1 support may lower affective filters and promote engagement.

Importantly, studies emphasize that effective L1 use is judicious and purposeful, not excessive. Butzkamm and Caldwell (2009) describe L1 as a “bridge” to L2 — useful when crossing difficult conceptual gaps but not as a permanent substitute for English interaction.

#### Challenges and Criticisms of L1 Use

Despite its benefits, L1 use in ELT/L remains controversial. Critics argue that too much reliance on the first language reduces exposure to English input, which is essential for acquisition (Krashen, 1985). According to the Input Hypothesis, learners need comprehensible input in the target language; therefore, maximizing English exposure is crucial.

Another concern is dependency. If students constantly rely on translation, they may struggle to think directly in English. Overuse of L1 may limit communicative practice and spontaneous interaction (Macaro, 2005).

There is also contextual variation. In multilingual classrooms where students have different first languages, using one shared L1 may not be practical or equitable. Thus, the effectiveness of L1 use often depends on classroom composition, proficiency level, and instructional goals.

#### Existing Reviews and Research Gaps

Several studies have examined L1 use in ELT classrooms, often focusing on specific aspects such as code-switching, vocabulary instruction, or teacher beliefs. For instance, Hall and Cook (2012) conducted a comprehensive review of research on L1 use and concluded that evidence generally supports limited and principled use.

However, much of the existing literature tends to focus on particular contexts (e.g., EFL settings in Asia) or specific educational levels. There is still a need for integrative perspectives that examine L1 use across learner ages, proficiency levels, and instructional settings.

Additionally, some earlier studies framed L1 use as a binary issue — either allowed or prohibited. More recent scholarship suggests that the real issue is not whether L1 should be used, but how, when, and why it should be used strategically in ELT/L.

#### Methodology

This research utilized a descriptive quantitative approach to explore the practical role and impact of the first language (L1) within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. The primary objective was to move beyond theoretical debates and capture the actual experiences and preferences of students in a higher education setting.

#### Participants and Setting

The study was conducted among a diverse group of 16 university students. To ensure the findings were relevant to academic language learning, the participants' English proficiency levels were documented. The majority of the respondents identified as Intermediate (62.5%), with the remaining 37.5% at an Advanced level. Their exposure to English education varied significantly; while 50% had been studying the language for 4 to 6 years, the group also included both newer learners and those with over 9 years of experience. This diversity provided a broad spectrum of viewpoints on when and why native language support is necessary.

#### Data Collection Instrument

A structured online survey, developed via Google Forms, served as the main instrument for data collection. The survey was designed to be accessible and anonymous to encourage honest feedback. It consisted of 9 targeted questions, including:

- Demographic and Background Questions: To establish the students' current proficiency and learning history.
- Frequency Scales: To measure how often L1 is actually used by both instructors and students during a typical lesson.
- Contextual Scenarios: Using Likert-scale and multiple-choice formats to identify specific pedagogical moments (such as explaining complex grammar or abstract vocabulary) where L1 is perceived as a helpful tool rather than a distraction.

#### Data Analysis Procedure

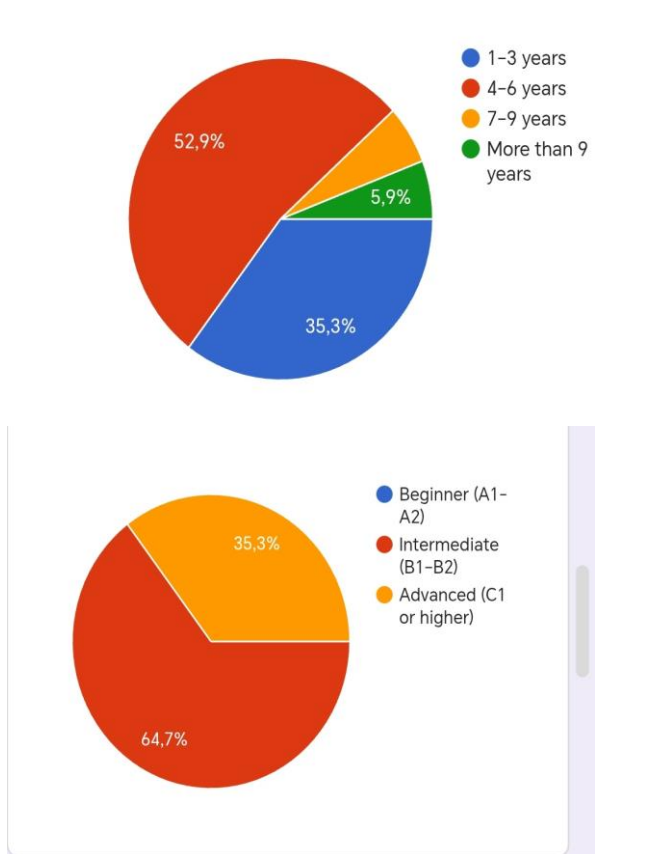
The data gathered from the 16 respondents was analyzed using frequency distribution and percentage calculations. Rather than focusing solely on raw numbers, the analysis aimed to identify patterns in student behavior. For instance, special attention was given to the "Sometimes" (50%) and "Often" (31.3%) frequency categories of L1 usage to understand the middle ground between a "monolingual" and "bilingual" classroom approach. Finally, qualitative suggestions from participants were categorized to provide a set of student-led recommendations for balancing two languages effectively in a learning environment.

#### Results

The data collected from the 16 participants provides a clear picture of how the first language (L1) is integrated into English language instruction at the university level.

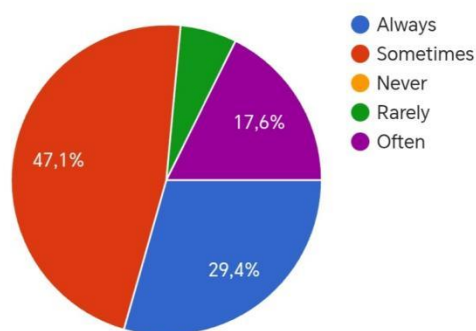
#### Participant Background and Proficiency

The study found that a majority of students operate at an Intermediate level (62.5%), followed by Advanced learners (37.5%). Their experience with the English language is extensive, with half of the group (50%) having studied it for 4 to 6 years. This suggests that the respondents are not beginners and possess enough linguistic awareness to evaluate the role of L1 in their own learning process.



### Frequency of L1 Usage

When asked how often they use their native language during English lessons, the results showed a varied distribution. Nearly half of the students (47.1%) reported using L1 'Sometimes,' making it the most frequent response. A significant portion of the cohort admitted to a more consistent reliance on their first language, with 29.4% claiming to use it 'Always' and 17.6% using it 'Often'. In contrast, only a small minority (5.9%) stated they 'Rarely' use L1, and none of the participants reported 'Never' using it. This indicates that L1 is a pervasive and functional element in the classroom experience for nearly all surveyed students.



From the teacher's perspective, students observed a similar trend. According to the respondents, 43.8% of teachers use the native language "Sometimes," and 37.5% use it "Often." Only 18.8% of students reported that their teachers use L1 "Rarely," suggesting that most instructors find pedagogical value in utilizing the students' first language.

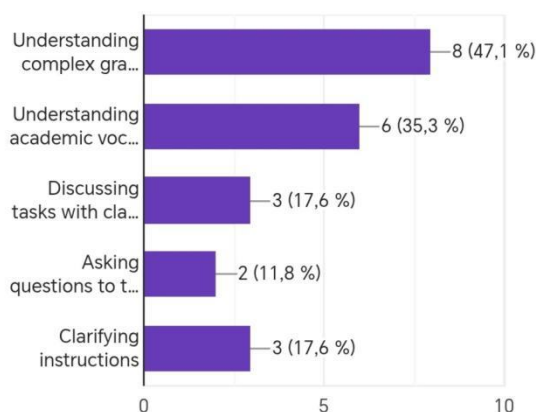
### Pedagogical Situations for L1 Use

One of the most significant findings involves the specific contexts where L1 is utilized by the learners. According to the data in Figure 4, the primary areas of necessity are:

**Complex Grammar:** Nearly half of the participants (47.1%) reported using their first language specifically to understand difficult grammatical structures.

**Academic Vocabulary:** A significant portion of the students (35.3%) find L1 helpful when learning academic words that are challenging to explain solely in English.

**Instructional and Peer Clarity:** The survey also highlights the functional role of L1 in classroom management; 17.6% of students use it for clarifying task instructions, and an equal 17.6% utilize it while discussing tasks with their classmates to ensure no one is left behind due to a language barrier.



### The Balance of Languages

Finally, the qualitative feedback suggests a strong preference for a "judicious" use of the first language. While students value the immersion that English-only environments provide, they also view their native language as a safety net. The results indicate that rather than seeing L1 as a hindrance, students perceive it as a bridge that supports the acquisition of the target language, especially when dealing with high-cognitive-load tasks.

### Discussion

The findings of this study provide significant insights into the ongoing debate regarding the use of the first language (L1) in English language teaching. The data clearly refutes the traditional "English-only" ideology, suggesting that a more nuanced, bilingual approach is preferred by students at the university level.

### The Necessity of L1 in Cognitive Processing

One of the most striking results is that over 80% of students rely on their native language to grasp complex grammatical structures. This suggests that for Intermediate and Advanced learners, the first language acts as a vital cognitive scaffold. When faced with high-level linguistic concepts that do not have a direct equivalent in the target language, students use their L1 to build a conceptual bridge. This does not indicate a lack of proficiency; rather, it shows a strategic use of existing mental resources to ensure deep understanding rather than superficial memorization.

### Teacher-Student Alignment

The data shows a remarkable alignment between student habits and teacher practices, with both groups using L1 "Sometimes" or "Often" in roughly equal

proportions. This alignment suggests that instructors are likely practicing "translanguaging"—a pedagogical method where the native language is used purposefully to support the learning of a second language. The fact that only 18.8% of students reported "Rarely" seeing L1 used by their teachers implies that most educators recognize that total immersion can sometimes lead to student frustration and disengagement, especially during complex instruction.

#### Overcoming the "Guilt" of L1 Use

Interestingly, while 50% of students use L1 "Sometimes," the qualitative feedback hints at a desire for balance. Students appear to value the native language specifically for abstract vocabulary and instructional clarity, but they also recognize the importance of English immersion. The discussion point here is that L1 should not be seen as a "crutch" to be discarded, but as a tool to be managed. The transition from Intermediate to Advanced levels does not necessarily mean the elimination of the first language, but rather a shift in how it is used—moving from basic translation to the clarification of subtle nuances.

#### Implications for Pedagogy

The results of this study suggest that English departments should consider formalizing guidelines for L1 use rather than banning it. Instead of an arbitrary "English-only" rule, teachers could be encouraged to use the first language strategically for "high-stakes" moments—such as defining abstract terms or ensuring that safety and task requirements are fully understood. This approach fosters a more inclusive and less stressful learning environment, ultimately accelerating the students' journey toward true bilingualism.

#### Conclusion

This study set out to investigate the practical role of the first language (L1) in university-level English classrooms, and the findings suggest a significant shift away from rigid monolingual policies. Based on the data collected from 16 Intermediate and Advanced learners, it is evident that the native language remains a valuable psychological and cognitive asset in the language learning process.

The research highlights that the majority of students and teachers utilize L1 "sometimes" or "often," particularly as a strategic tool for deconstructing complex grammatical structures and clarifying abstract vocabulary. Rather than acting as a barrier to English acquisition, the first language serves as a necessary scaffold that provides students with the clarity and confidence needed to engage with higher-level academic content. The high level of agreement among participants regarding the helpfulness of L1 in specific pedagogical contexts suggests that a "judicious" and "principled" use of the native language is far more effective than its total exclusion.

In conclusion, the era of viewing the native language as a distraction in the EFL classroom should come to an end. Instead, educators should embrace a balanced approach that prioritizes English immersion while allowing for targeted L1 support during high-cognitive-load tasks. Future research could focus on developing specific frameworks that help teachers determine the exact "tipping point" where L1 use transitions from being a helpful tool to an unnecessary reliance. Ultimately, fostering a bilingual environment that respects the students' existing linguistic identity appears to be the most sustainable path toward achieving advanced proficiency in English.

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