LLT Journal, e-ISSN 2579-9533, p-ISSN 1410-7201, Vol. 25, No. 1, April 2022, pp. 310-318

LLT Journal: A Journal on Language and Language Teaching
http://e-journal.usd.ac.id/index.php/LLT
Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS ON THE USE OF L1 IN EFL LEARNING

Alya Sekar Anindya[1], Dian Inayati[2], and Amidi Ulani[3]
Universitas Brawijaya, Indonesia[1,2]
SMP Labschool Jakarta, Indonesia[3]
alyasekar4@gmail.com[1], dianina@ub.ac.id[2], and amidilabs@gmail.com[3]
correspondence: alyasekar4@gmail.com
https://doi.org/10.24071.4162
received 12 January 2022; accepted 17 May 2022

Abstract

The use of first language (L1) in EFL classrooms is considered taboo since it is believed to hinder students' foreign language (L2) development, while others support it due to its benefits in facilitating students' access to L2. Hence, this study attempts to investigate students' perceptions on the use of L1 in EFL classrooms. In this qualitative study, the data were collected through observations and interviews with three selective respondents. The findings reveal the students' positive perception on the use of L1 in their EFL learning. Mediated by L1, the students were able to understand and engage well to EFL learning, which they believe would help shape and develop their English. Despite the benefits, they agree on some restrictions made by EFL teachers to provide opportunities for students to practice their English. Some suggestions for EFL teachers are postulated.

Keywords: EFL, first language, students' perception

Introduction

Mastering foreign languages particularly English is crucial these days due to its important role in every aspect of our lives. However, learning English may be challenging for students whose first language (L1) is not English. Some students still find it hard to use English properly especially for communication purposes, which leads to using their L1 in English classes.

Other reasons considered responsible for the use of L1 in L2 classes include students' limited knowledge of vocabulary, anxiety in English learning, or way to communicate easily either with their teacher or peers. According to Paker and Karaağaç (2015), the use of students' mother tongue is usually used as an act of bonding between teacher and students (e.g. making jokes, showing concern, or showing their empathy), explaining difficult concepts and grammar rules, and talking about exams. However, some language experts and teachers question L1 use in L2 learning since it may hinder students' opportunities in mastering L2 and thus consider it taboo (Kelleher 2013). Hence, Gill (2005) found that teachers feel guilty when using their L1 due to its ban from using it in L2 class.

Some educators argue that L1 is unnecessary inside L2 classrooms. This issue is very common in the Indonesian educational system whether to give the first language a chance or full in English. However, according to Pardede (2018), not many studies take up a topic about the role of Indonesian in English classrooms. Sari, et al. (2020), for instance, found that students are still influenced by their first language when making sentences in English by borrowing some words into the sentence.

The use of L1 in the EFL class brings numerous advantages. One of them is because students and their teacher share the same first language, it is good for them to bond with each other. Getie (2020) stated that students display a more positive attitude towards L2 if there is good interaction between students and their teacher rather than those who have less interaction. The use of L1 in L2 classes is also sometimes a consequence of students' limitations in their oral performance in English. Gaebler (2014) in his study asserted that learners realize the use of L1 in interaction is necessary for some circumstances, for instance when they cannot express themselves in a clear articulate manner. Turin (2018) also found that the use of L1 in L2 classes may affect students' ability in their speaking skills, vocabulary, and even confidence in using L2. Turin further added that students who often use the target language in their L2 classes can get more chances to know more about the language they are studying. It is because even if they pronounce or say it incorrectly, they will get feedback on what they should have said from the teacher. Hence, van Wyk and Mostert (2016) suggested that to gain learners' second language sufficient level of L2 proficiency, the use of L1 should not be neglected.

While the use of L1 in ELT class may bring benefits to beginner learners, its benefits for intermediate or advanced learners are still in question. For beginners, the use of L1 is helpful since they are new to learning English, and most of them have not mastered vocabulary as much as the upper level. Based on research that was conducted by Alvarez (2014), students consider that their L1 can be a tool in learning a foreign language for them to compare their L1 to their L2. However, studies on the benefits of L1 for intermediate to advanced learners are relatively scarce. Based on the discrepancies, this study is conducted to investigate intermediate-level students' perceptions on the use of L1 inside an EFL classroom. The participants involved are intermediate to pre-advanced students attending a prestigious private junior high school in Indonesia and were using L1 during EFL learning in classes. Conducting this study would thus be beneficial particularly for ELT teachers on how to make use of their L1 in English classes sufficiently and contextually.

Review of Related Literature

The use of mother tongue (L1) can be considered taboo especially in teaching and learning foreign languages for several reasons, one of which is that it limits students' knowledge of their target language (Alvarez, 2014). Sari, et al. (2020), for instance, found that students are still influenced by their first language when making sentences in English by borrowing some words into the sentence. Historically, the use of mother tongue in foreign language classes has been restricted in some teaching methods like Natural Approach and Direct Method. However, others argue that using L1 can give students a sense of security (Larsen-Freeman and Anderson, 2011). Students feel more secure with both their teacher and their environment

because they can fully understand the situation, which is believed to help them learn the target language. Likewise, Turin (2018) found that the use of L1 inside foreign language classes can help students and the teacher build rapport and make students feel secure in class. She added that the prohibition of using L1 can cause students to feel afraid to express their opinions in class. Thus, the use of L1 inside the classroom is to create a sense of security and help learners express their feelings by using their L1 (Ghorbani 2012).

Due to the mixed results, the perceptions and attitudes toward the use of L1 in L2 classes also vary. Tsang and Lo (2020) found that students have positive perceptions and suggest making the content comprehensible in both their L1 and target language to prevent confusion. Meanwhile, others do not treat the use of L1 in EFL classes due to its negative transfer and borrowings (Sari et al., 2020). In their study in Malaysia, Maniam and Kesevan (2016) found that the use of students' L1 to some extent affects their L2 learning because of the language subjects that they have in school (English, Malay, and Tamil, as their mother tongue). Furthermore, Akowuah et al. (2018) in their interview with ten students in Ghana revealed that four of them established that the use of the L1 shaped their habits and brought negative effects on their English language performance. Thus, Piper et al. (2018), based on their findings, claimed that using L1 has not been beneficial for students in learning English although they did not specifically mention the particular effects of L1 use on the students' English learning. However, De Luca (2018) argued that L1 should be enhanced in L2 learning since the benefits outweigh the disadvantages and thus insisted on never perishing it.

All in all, the use of L1 inside EFL classrooms can bring advantages for both students and teachers in some ways like giving students a sense of security while in class and building rapport between students and teacher. However, without paying attention to its usage, it can affect learners' performance in English, leading to overdependence of L1 instead of the target language. Thus, investigating students' perception on L1 use in EFL classes is important to help identify what benefits this brings to students and what teachers should do to optimize the students' English ability despite the use of L1 during English learning.

Method

This study was conducted at a private junior high school in Jakarta, Indonesia. It was one of the most favorite private schools in Indonesia with a curriculum whose English subject was given more time allocations than what was served in the national curriculum. The materials were also digitalized which helped teachers and students engage better with the content.

This study used a qualitative approach with a narrative inquiry and involved several stages. At the observation stage, the students' performance in EFL classes was observed for approximately one month by focusing on the oral language they used to respond to the activities and ask questions. From the observation, it was known that several students often used their L1 during the EFL classes. They were responding to the teacher during class using both English and their L1, while when asking the teacher, most students fully used their mother tongue.

Next, the active students who used mostly L1 were then identified to find out their English speaking proficiency. Based on the results, the majority of their speaking proficiency was at the intermediate and pre-advanced levels. From the

analysis, three students were then carefully selected based on the consideration of their L1 use during participation and their speaking proficiency. They were 12-14 years old students, participating actively in class by asking questions, giving opinions, and responding to the teacher's questions, all of which were done mostly in L1. In this research, the focus is on the students who used L1 or code-switching in the EFL classrooms despite their proficient ability in English.

The last stage that the researcher administered in this study was interviewing the selected students. The type of interview that is being used in this research is a structured interview with several questions that have been prepared before the interview being held based on the topic of the use of L1, the interview guide that is used for the interview is provided in the appendix. Due to the pandemic, the interview was held by a video call, each of which lasted for around 45-60 minutes. After the interviews were held, the data were ready for analysis.

Several steps were held during data analysis. After gathering all of the results from selected students, the researcher looked for the theme and similarities of each answer. Then, the researcher annotates the results to each category based on the students' answers into three main categories, which are communication, rules in the class, and different skills and confidence levels, and analyzes them descriptively.

Findings and Discussion

Student A (male, 13 years old, 8th grade), Student B (female, 13 years old, 8th grade), and Student C (female, 13 years old, 8th grade). Three of them have the same L1 which is Bahasa Indonesia. Moreover, outside the class, they rarely speak English. The result from the observation showed several students were categorized as active during the EFL class by giving their opinions when the teacher asked questions, answering the teacher's questions, and asking the teacher for permission and also clarification. However, not all of them use English in EFL classes, they tend to use their L1 (Bahasa Indonesia). Based on the interview that was conducted with three selected students, who are Student A, Student B, and Student C, the researcher found several things about students' use of L1in EFL class.

Easier for Communication

The reasons why the students are using their L1 in EFL class are basically because it is an easier way to communicate with the teacher since both of them share the same mother tongue (L1). It is also because they follow previous students who use their L1 when responding to the teacher whenever the teacher is checking their attendance.

The major findings based on the interview are the students often use their L1/L1when they give responses to the teacher while checking the attendance. The students are saying 'Hadir' instead of 'Present'. Other than that, students are using their L1 when asking permission to go to the toilet, to turn the camera off, and also when asking questions/clarifications about an explanation and tasks that are hard to use in English.

Excerpt 1 gives an example of the use of L1 that Student A used during EFL class.

> *"I sometimes use Bahasa Indonesia when I am explaining English things to people who don't understand English, or sometimes I say 'hadir' but I*

> *also say 'present' sometimes. I usually say "Pak/Bu, saya izin ke toilet", or things related like asking permission to turn off the camera due to unstable internet, "Pak/Bu saya izin offcam, Internet saya sedang unstable."*
>
> (Retrieved from the interview with Student A)

Based on excerpt 1, the use of L1 inside the EFL classroom is a strategy for students to address their thoughts in asking for permission and giving responses to the teacher/other students as well. He uses his L1 instead of his target language since it is easier to use.

Rules from the Teacher

The students simply use their L1 because there were no rules from the teacher for students to avoid using their L1 in EFL class. Therefore, the use of L1 in EFL classes by junior high school students is still used. However, to not forget that they are in EFL class, it also would be fine if the teacher was willing to use English.

The students think that it is okay to use their L1 in EFL class because for some students who do not understand English it is very helpful. Nonetheless, in their EFL class, there are no rules for not using their L1. The students think it would be better for students' performance in their speaking skills. They will be challenged and also their speaking skill will be improved. The students considered they had learned about the basics of English, so if they are required to communicate in English it would be great.

In excerpt 2, the reason for the use of target language by students will be involved.

> *"Probably because it is more common and easier to use. Also, there is no rule to not use Bahasa to communicate in our class"*
>
> (Retrieved from the interview with Student B)

Based upon excerpt 2, using L1 inside EFL class is not only comes from students' desire, but also the teacher's uncertainty rules to use or against it in class. Thus, students tend to use it.

Different Skill and Confidence Levels

The difference in their level of skill and confidence in performing their English skill can also be the reason to use L1 inside EFL class. Students might be feeling more confident whenever they speak in their L1 instead of their target language.

Excerpt 3 is another reason to use Bahasa in EFL class.

> *"Different students do have different confidence/skill levels. So, I guess it's kind of that trade-off between trying to communicate in English but still be able to fully understand what they're learning."*
>
> (Retrieved from the interview with Student C)

Even though the students are mostly considered proficient speakers in English, each of them must have a different scale of confidence. Thus, it also makes them use their L1 instead of English in EFL classes. The use of L1 inside the EFL classroom is quite helpful for them if they never heard words in English before and the teacher would translate them or define them for them. Fortunately, the teacher doesn't often use students' L1 while explaining the materials. In class, the teacher only uses students' L1 when necessary.

Excerpt 4 served as an example of the use of L1 from the teacher.

"For example, some students who don't know what drought means, needs to be told in Bahasa Indonesia (kekeringan) so that they will understand it better"

(Retrieved from the interview with Student A)

According to students' interview results, they suggest that it would be better if the teacher would make a rule where both students and teacher should speak in full English. In addition, if the students ask the teacher using their mother tongue, they wish their teacher to respond in their L1 as well to not make confusion because of the different language they use. Given that, the students think that the teacher must use their L1 in class for some reason. They think that it is useful for them to gain more vocabulary and also to communicate better as well with the teacher.

Based on the results from this research, some points could be discussed. As stated by Getie (2020), the interaction that happened between students and their teacher will affect their attitude towards their target language than those who have less interaction. It is linked to what the students asserted that they think the use of their L1 in EFL class is necessary to make them communicate with their teacher easily and to express their thoughts commonly by using their L1 since they have the same L1 with the teacher. Getie (2020) also asserted that the teacher is one of the most important elements that gives influence towards students' learning a language. Furthermore, the students think they can easily interact and communicate with the teacher to express something like asking questions/clarifications and permission in their L1 rather than in English because they think it is a common way. This result is consistent with what was found by Edstorm (2006) that the usefulness of L1 in clarification of assignments, grading a method, and also classroom strategies (cited in S. Almohaimeed and M. Almurshed, 2018). It is found that students think it is so much easier to use their L1 to express simple things in EFL class to the teacher also because they share the same mother tongue. This finding is also supported by Jadallah & Hasan (2010). They asserted the use of L1 in EFL class by selecting it in using L2 when possible and first language when necessary and using the first language as a conscious and meditated choice with a facilitative and supportive role for students (cited in Alvarez, 2014).

Some studies have found that using L1 is unavoidable and fundamental to L2 acquisition (Schneider, 1979, cited in Kharma and Hajjaj, 1989). Other than that, the results that are shown are supported by van Wyk and Mostert (2016) suggestion, which is to not disregard the use of their L1 to achieve students' L2 sufficient levels of proficiency. Given this, it is shown that good communication between students can be built by sharing similarities, which in this case is their mother tongue. As

discussed earlier, Pardede (2018) has an opposite theory with the finding of this research. He stated that the use of L1 in EFL classes includes a big disadvantage due to most English teachers in Indonesian public schools being native Indonesian. This notion is consistent with the result that has been found, in which students and teachers share the same L1 that makes the students assume that it is better to communicate in their L1 than in English. Moreover, the researcher found that the students think their usage of their first language is because they have limitations in their speaking skills. This is why sometimes they confidently answer the teacher's question via chat rather than speak out loud. Turin (2018) found in her research that the teachers think L1 helps the learners because they are more confident in speaking language where they understand everything. The finding that the researcher found was also students think it is better to still use their L1 in EFL class to gain a connection between the teacher and the students. All in all, the researcher agrees with Pardede (2018) which asserted that L1 can bring a massive disadvantage to the learners' performance in English, due to most teachers being native Indonesian. The reason to agree with this statement is that by sharing L1, if the teacher does not give students a good explanation or good examples about the material, the students would follow them and they would use it the way their teacher explained.

However, a few points need to be considered while taking these research findings into account. This research was conducted in a very short period so the researcher could only get limited information from the students, the teacher, and the environment. The researcher suggests that for further study to involve not only the students but also the teacher to be the participants since the teacher is also having a role inside the class. Furthermore, with the limited time, the speaking test and the interview were also taken in a very limited time. Due to this condition, the researcher also suggests for the further researcher to conduct a similar study with a longer period to gain the data well.

The teacher has to make rules about the language that is used in the class so the students will not use their L1 too often rather than using English language itself. Maybe the teacher can limit the use of students' L1 in some aspects so the students do not speak fully in their L1 in English class. Also, in the future to research deeper on the other aspects like students' communication with the teacher and also the rules in class because, in this research, the students stated that their teacher does not give them rules about the use of their L1.

Conclusion

In short, even though the use of students' L1 is categorized as taboo, the use of it in junior high school students especially inside the EFL classroom showed a good impact on the students. It helps them to communicate with the teacher because using their L1 is a simple and common way to express things like asking for permission (to turn off the camera or to go to the restroom), asking questions and clarifications about exams or tasks, and responding when the teacher is checking attendance. Besides the effective way of using it, students said that the reason why they use their L1 in EFL class is that there were no rules to not using it so they tend to use it rather than use English.

References

Akowuah, J. A., Patnaik, S., & Kyei, E. (2018). Evidence-based learning of students' performance in English language in Adu Gyamfi Senior High School in the Sekyere South District of Ghana. *Cogent Social Sciences, 4*(1), 1-10. https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2018.1503577

Alvarez, C. & Fernando, L. (2014). Selective use of the mother tongue to enhance students' English learning processes...beyond the same assumptions. *PROFILE Issues in Teachers' Professional Development*, *16*(1), 137–151. https://doi.org/10.15446/profile.v16n1.38661

Celik, O., & Yavuz, F. (2015). The relationship between speaking grades and listening grades of university level preparatory students. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences, 197*, 2137–40. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.07.339

De Luca, C. (2018). Mother tongue as a universal human right. *International Journal of Speech-Language Pathology, 20*(1), 161–65. https://doi.org/10.1080/17549507.2017.1392606

Edstrom, A. (2006). L1 use in the L2 classroom: One teacher's self-evaluation. *The Canadian Modern Language Review, 63*(2), 275–292. https://doi.org/10.3138/cmlr.63.2.275

Gaebler, P. (2014). L1 use in fl classrooms: Graduate students' and professors' perceptions of English use in foreign language courses. *The CATESOL Journal*, *25*(1), 66–94.

Getie, A. S. (2020). Factors affecting the attitudes of students towards learning English as a foreign language. *Cogent Education*, *7*(1), 1-37. https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2020.1738184

Ghorbani, A. (2012). Mother tongue in the EFL classroom. *Advances in Language and Literary Studies, 3*(2):63–75. https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.alls.v.3n.2p.63

Gill, S. (2005). The L1 in the L2 classroom. *Humanizing Language Teaching, 7*(5).

Jadallah, M., & Hassan, F. (2010). A review of some new trends in using L1 in the EFL classroom. Retrieved from http://www.qou.edu/english/conferences/firstNationalConference/pdfFiles/drMufeed.pdf

Jespersen, O. (1922). *Language: Its nature, development and origin*. London: George Allen & Unwin LTD.

Kelleher, M. (2013). Overcoming the first language taboo to enhance learning a foreign language. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences, 93*, 2037–2042. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.10.161

Kharma, N.N., & Hajjaj, A. H. (1989). Use of the mother tongue in the ESL classroom. *IRAL*, *27*(3), 223-235.

Larsen-Freeman, D., & Anderson, M. (2011). *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching (3rd ed)*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Maniam, M., & Kesevan, H. V. (2016). Mother tongue syntactical influence in a ESL class. *International Journal of Language and Linguistics*, *3*(3).

Paker, T., & Karaağaç, Ö. (2015). The Use and Functions of Mother Tongue in EFL Classes. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, *199*, 111–119. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.07.494

Pardede, P. (2018). Use of mother tongue in EFL classes of secondary schools in Jabodebek: Students' and Teachers' perception. *JET (Journal of English Teaching), 4*(2), 62-80. https://doi.org/10.33541/jet.v4i2.831

Piper, B., Zuilkowski, S. S., Kwayumba, D., & Oyanga, A. (2018). Examining the secondary effects of mother-tongue literacy instruction in Kenya: Impacts on student learning in English, Kiswahili, and mathematics. *International Journal of Educational Development*, *59*,110–127. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2017.10.002

Almohaimeed, M. S., & Almurshed, H. M. (2018). Foreign language learners' attitudes and perceptions of L1 use in L2 classroom. *Arab World English Journal*, *9*(4), 433–446. https://doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol9no4.32

Sari, P. P. N., Santosa, M. H., & Adnyani, N. L. P. S. (2020). Investigating junior high school students' errors in using English past tense: A look from technological and sociological foundations. *ETERNAL (English, Teaching, Learning, and Research Journal)*, *6*(2):245. https://doi.org/10.24252/Eternal.V62.2020.A5

Tavil, Z. M. (2010). Integrating listening and speaking skills to facilitate English language learners' communicative competence. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, *9*, 765–70. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2010.12.231

Tsang, A., & Lo, F. (2020). Bilingual education through a pluri-centric approach: A case study of the effects of simultaneously learning two languages on l1 and l2 reading and writing proficiency. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, *67*, 100927. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.stueduc.2020.100927

Turin, T. A. (2018). Usefulness of using mother tongue in foreign language classroom. *International Journal of English Language Teaching* 5(8), 27–36.

van Wyk, J., & Mostert, M. L. (2016). The influence of mother tongue and gender on the acquisition of English (L2): The case of Afrikaans in Windhoek schools, Namibia. *Cogent Education*, *3*(1), 1-12. https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2016.1210997