



## Investigating the Teachers' Perceptions toward the Use of L1 in Teaching English

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### Abstract

This study explores the teachers' perceptions of using the first language (L1) when teaching English. The conceptual work of literature review is applied as the research method. This means previous works were analysed to investigate teachers' perceptions toward the L1 use in teaching English. The result shows that the L1 can be used in teaching grammar, vocabulary, and giving instructions. Teachers are also divided into three positions in perceiving the use of L1 in teaching English, which are the virtual, maximal, and optimal position. Therefore, teachers might use this study's results as the information to use the L1 in classrooms. This may also be beneficial for Indonesian educational stakeholders and the government to specifically define the use of L1 in teaching English.

**Keywords:** L1; EFL; teachers' perceptions

### Introduction

This paper scrutinises English teachers' perceptions toward the L1 use in teaching English. The question of whether to include and exclude L1 in teaching English has been deemed as the heated issue. Both views have been underpinned by robust theoretical frameworks and principles. On the one hand, the exclusion of L1 in teaching English is predominantly supported with the second language acquisition (SLA) theory that postulates optimal improvements of target language could be merely attained by having more exposures towards it (Krashen, 1987). This theory is reflected in a language learning strategy called an intralingual strategy that solely focuses on employing L2 in classrooms (Stern, 1992). On the other hand, contrary to Krashen's idea above, the socio-cultural theory states that learning will be effective when it is applied such scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978). In this sense, L1, in this context Bahasa Indonesia could be positioned as a valuable scaffolding to foster students' understanding of the chosen target language, English. It may happen since Bahasa Indonesia could be utilised to illuminate tough concepts and words that might be challenging to understand by learners in English. This notion is manifested in a cross-lingual strategy that allows L1 in teaching L2 (Stern, 1992).

Moreover, the study about teachers' perceptions of the application of L1 in teaching English has been under-explored (Hlas, 2016; Sali, 2014), including in the

Indonesian senior high school context. Whereas in fact, teachers' perceptions on the employment of L1 are important to discuss because it crucially affects students' performance (Rubdy, 2007). It happens because teachers know learning environments better than other schools' elements to formulate classroom languages effectively. Accordingly, this study attempts to explore how teachers perceive the use of L1 in teaching English, in which it could be utilised to orientate L1 use in classrooms and to fill in significant gaps on literature.

The research focus was also attracted by the researcher's previous teaching experiences, which informed that the L1 is perceived as a barrier in teaching English. In particular, English should be taught by using the language itself, without the assistance of other languages. This teaching practice is called the monolingual approach, which means only one language is used in classrooms (Cheng, 2013). This monolingual approach offers students an intensive exposure to English, which is still supported by some Indonesian teachers to such an extent that they have banned the use of the L1 when teaching English (Cheng, 2013; Zacharias, 2004).

However, issues emerge from this monolingual teaching practice when it is employed in Indonesian schools. This issue could have been affected by these students' low proficiency in English or by the researcher's teaching skills, but the experience still informs the ways in which the L1 can be used as scaffolding when teaching English. For example, Bahasa Indonesia can be used to explain difficult words and grammatical concepts, which learners may find it complicated and hard to understand when it is explained only in English (Hidayati, 2012). Therefore, this research focuses on the L1 use in teaching English.

## **Method**

This study is literature study, analysing previous works and theories that are relevant to the issue. The previous references obtained by means of research in the literature study serve as the basic foundation and main tool for the practice of field research. Furthermore, Bryman (2016) explains that the literature study is a summary of articles from journals, books, and other documents that describe information. Moreover, Bryman (2016) reveals that a literature study is a method used to collect data or sources from previous studies. Therefore, this paper explores a bunch of previous works. It is selected from reputable articles, books, and others. The selected previous studies were critically analysed and evaluated to elicit the information, before it is used to build sound arguments in this work.

## **Results**

### ***The Debate about Exclusion and Inclusion of the L1***

The notion of the monolingual approach currently still influences the practice of English language teaching. This principle instructs teachers to use one language, English, in the classroom, without the assistance of other languages, including the L1 (Cummins, 2007). This view is reinforced by a large number of English teachers, who still exclude the L1 from their English teaching (Cummins, 2007). Those teachers believe that it is best to teach English monolingually, using English

without the assistance of other languages, such as the L1 (Cummins, 2007). Teachers are concerned that, if they also employ the L1 when teaching English, students' acquisition of English might drop, since they would then have little chance to practise English, when they are also taught and asked to use their L1 in classrooms (Swain & Lapkin, 2000; Turnbull, 2001; Turnbull & Arnett, 2002).

Furthermore, the monolingual view is underpinned by Krashen's theory of second language acquisition (SLA), which asserts that students effectively absorb English when teachers provide significant exposure to the language and opportunities to practise the language, without the presence of their L1 (Krashen, 1982, as cited in Wu, 2018). Thus, if teachers use the L1 in their English classrooms, the quantity of the English spoken would decrease, hampering students' effective acquisition of the language.

The SLA theory, which postulates that students can effectively acquire English if they are given significant exposure to the language, merely considers the quantity of the language given to students (Krashen, 1982, as cited in Wu, 2018). However, the quality aspect of English teaching should be considered as well (Horng, Hong, ChanLin, Chang, & Chu, 2005). Giving students significant exposure to the language is not the only issue, but also involves the ways in which teachers find creative and appropriate ways to help students that are having difficulties in understanding the given learning materials (Horng et al., 2005).

The L1 can be used as scaffolding in such instances, when students do not understand learning materials provided in English (Forman, 2008). Consequently, the use of L1 is beneficial because it helps students to master English through a framework of scaffolding (Lin, 2015). Therefore, the function of the L1 as scaffolding when teaching English is the main theoretical framework of this research, underpinned by Vygotsky's cognitive and sociocultural theory (Woolfolk & Margetts, 2016). This theoretical framework is explained below.

### **Functions of the L1 Used by Teachers**

Teaching grammar is considered the first function of the L1's application by teachers as scaffolding when teaching English (Al-Nofaie, 2010; Cheng, 2013; Hidayati, 2012; Hlas, 2016; Shabir, 2017). This is because learners tend to find it difficult to understand grammar points in English (Mishra, 2010). This aligns with a study conducted by Febrianingrum (2014) in Indonesian senior high schools, which found that teachers use the L1 to explain English grammar because learners often make grammar mistakes, due to its complexity. For instance, teachers use Bahasa Indonesia, the students' L1, to describe the concept of the gerund as a grammar rule in English by saying "*setelah after itu kata kerjanya di gerundkan*", which, in English, means "when the preposition 'after' is followed by a verb, the verb should add '-ing', which is called the 'gerund'". Consequently, using the L1 as scaffolding effectively helps learners understand the complexity of English grammar (Sharma, 2006; Tang, 2002). Moreover, the use of the L1 as scaffolding reduces the complexity of grammar rules, which also relates to the notion of scaffolding that is delineated by McLoughlin and Marshall (2000), who assert that scaffolding is utilised to reduce the complexity of grammar in English.

Teaching vocabulary is categorised as the second function of using the L1 as scaffolding in classrooms (Cheng, 2013; Febrianingrum, 2014; Sali, 2014; Silvani, 2014). Teachers need to use the L1 to provide students with clear explanations of difficult English vocabulary (Hidayati, 2012). This is supported by results found by Jingxia (2010) in the Chinese university context, which reveal that the majority of teachers in the study tend to use Chinese as students' L1 to explain tough English vocabulary. Moreover, in the Indonesian context, Silvani (2014) further explains that the use of Bahasa Indonesia as the L1 is useful to help teachers explain the meaning of difficult English words by providing repetition. The example of using the L1 as scaffolding in the repetitious form can be seen in a conversation between a teacher and their students (Silvani, 2014):

*Teacher: It is 'hazardous' for you to go to the concert alone. Do you know the meaning of 'hazardous'?*

*Students: What do you mean, sir? We do not understand it.*

*Teacher: The meaning is berbahaya in Bahasa Indonesia.*

In this conversation, the teacher repeats the meaning of 'hazardous' by using the word *berbahaya* in Bahasa Indonesia to assist students' understanding. This use of the L1 to explain difficult English vocabulary through repetition also relates to the notion of point-of-need scaffolding, which is defined as assistance given to students to clarify complicated learning materials by employing repetition to assist their comprehension (Sharpe, 2001).

Giving instructions is the third function of using the L1 to teach English. A study conducted by Machaal (2012) in the Saudi university context reinforces that giving classroom instructions is believed by teachers as one of the most valuable functions of the application of the L1 when teaching English. This is because giving instructions is crucial in guiding students from the very beginning of the learning process, since it is difficult to clarify given instructions when learners have already misunderstood them (Debreli, 2016). The function of using the L1 to give instructions also aligns with the principle of scaffolding, which is used as a valuable resource to help students understand given instructions (Woolfolk & Margetts, 2016). Moreover, Jingxia's (2010) study of Chinese universities demonstrates that the majority of teachers use Chinese as the L1 to assign students classroom exercises, when students have doubts about instructions given in English. Consequently, it is useful to help students to understand given instructions. However, giving classroom instructions in the L1 is also considered an avoidable activity in the EFL classroom. For example, in an intermediate school located in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, teachers avoided using the L1 (Arabic) when giving classroom instructions because they want to accustom learners to practising and receiving instructions in English (Al-Nofaie, 2010).

### ***Teachers' Perceptions of the L1 Use in Teaching English***

Macaro (2009) notes that teachers can be categorised into three different groups, in terms of their perceptions of using the L1 when teaching English. The first is the virtual position, where teachers solely use English when teaching the subject, without the assistance of the L1 in classrooms (Macaro, 2009). This is because it provides ample opportunities for learners to practise English without

being hindered by their L1, which assists them in acquiring English effectively (Cook, 2001). This notion is reinforced by a study conducted by Manara (2007) in three universities in Central Java, Indonesia, which states that the majority of teachers agree that English must be applied to the fullest extent in classrooms. This is because the maximum use of English is perceived as a valuable opportunity that offers students maximum exposure to English in classrooms, without the emergence of their L1, which helps them to master English (Turnbull, 2001).

This situation might be affected by Krashen's second language acquisition (SLA) theory, which postulates that the more students are exposed to English, the more knowledge of the language they acquire (Krashen, 1982, as cited in Wu, 2018). Thus, learners will more easily understand the given learning materials when teachers deliver them in English. Consequently, Manara (2007) asserts that the majority of teachers ban the use of the L1 when teaching English because it can significantly dissuade students from using English in classrooms. However, there is also a contrasting view called the maximal position.

The second category is the maximal position, which is defined as teachers who perceive the maximal use of the L1 as useful, in order to help students in mastering English, particularly when they have insufficient proficiency in English (Macaro, 2009).

This is because low proficiency learners of English tend to have difficulties in comprehending English materials, since they lack, for instance, English vocabulary (Ahmad, 2009). Hence, when students are supported by the employment of the L1 to learn English, there is a possibility that they can absorb English materials effectively (Ahmad, 2009). For example, when students do not understand the meaning of certain English words, teachers can help them understand the related vocabulary by illustrating its context using their L1. This could consequently prove useful in terms of supporting their study of English.

This second categorisation is outlined in a study conducted by Latsanyphone and Bouangeune (2009), which focused on teaching English to low proficiency learners at the National University of Laos. The study found that teaching English using students' L1 enhances their understanding of English, including learning new vocabulary items, because illustrating English words using the student's L1, Lao, helps them to understand the meaning of the words clearly (Latsanyphone & Bouangeune, 2009).

Moreover, studies including those from Al-Nofaie (2010), Asmari (2014), and Debreli (2016) show that EFL teachers generally bear positive perceptions toward the L1's use in teaching English. This is because the employment of the L1 can enhance students' performance in English (Asmari, 2014) because it can lessen learners' anxiety and increase effective learning environments to learn English (Hall & Cook, 2012). Consequently, it is beneficial to help low proficiency learners to learn English (Asmari, 2014). However, this maximal position is also challenged by another view; namely, the optimal position. This is because employing the L1 in classrooms is not the sole issue: it must also be judiciously implemented, for specific reasons, to offer an effective use of the L1 to teach English (Cheng, 2013).

The third teachers' position, in terms of perceiving the use of the L1 when teaching English, is the optimal position, which argues that the application of the L1 in teaching English is effective when it is only used for specific reasons (Macaro, 2009). In other words, the L1 must be judiciously employed by teachers, with regard to specific student contexts, different classroom and course situations. This condition can be seen in studies conducted by Al-Nofaie (2010), Debreli (2016), Hidayati (2012), and Shabir (2017), all of which reinforce that the majority of teachers perceive that the L1 must be judiciously used, for only specific reasons. These include students' needs, their language proficiency levels, and the goals of the course or task (Manara, 2007). This is because teachers can utilise the potentiality of the L1 and maximise the use of English in the classroom at the same time (Cheng, 2013).

Corcoran (2009) also suggests that the L1 should only be applied to teaching English for particular reasons, such as considering teachers' English proficiency levels. To some extent, Corcoran's view aligns with a case study conducted by Bateman (2008), which focuses on ten teachers' perceptions of using the L1 and found that teachers' English proficiency skills influence the use of the L1 in classrooms. This is because it is impossible for teachers to use the target language, English, in the entire class, due to their limited English proficiency skills (Wu, 2018). Therefore, applying the L1 is also necessary in a situation where teachers' English proficiency skills are limited.

In conclusion, all of these studies above provide valuable insights into the difference between the three positions on using the L1 when teaching English, which are the virtual, maximal, and optimal positions. In the virtual position, teachers argue that English materials should only be taught using the language itself, without the assistance of the L1, because they intend to provide students with significant exposure and opportunities to practise English (Macaro, 2009). This view is challenged by the maximal position, in which teachers believe that the L1 must be maximally applied to help students grasp English effectively (Macaro, 2009). This means the optimal position proposes teachers only use the L1 for particular reasons, like responding to students' needs and classroom situations (Manara, 2007).

## **Conclusion**

This conceptual work indicates that the L1 can be applied as a valuable resource in teaching English. First, in teaching grammar. This is because students find it difficult to understand grammar points in English. Secondly, the L1 can be used in teaching vocabulary in order to assist learners in comprehending certain unfamiliar words. Last, giving instruction is also an activity that can be helped by the assistance of L1. Teachers are also divided into three positions in perceiving the use of L1 in teaching English, which are the virtual, maximal, and optimal position.

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