



iii

The Use Of First Language In Elt for Indonesian Young Learner: Efl Teachers' Perspectives

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Abstract

The use of first language (L1) in English Language Teaching (ELT) for young learners has been being a long-standing pedagogical debate. While traditional approaches often encourage exclusive use of English, in contexts such as Indonesia where English is a foreign language, young learners may get benefit from occasional L1 support. However, research focusing on teachers' perspectives in this area remains limited, especially in the Indonesian EFL setting. This study addresses this gap by exploring how Indonesian EFL teachers perceive and implement L1 in teaching English to young learners. The study aimed to investigate teachers' beliefs about the functions, advantages, and challenges of using L1, as well as the extent to which it facilitates or hinders language acquisition. Employing a qualitative descriptive design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations involving 3 EFL teachers from Islamic elementary schools in Ponorogo. The data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and insights. The findings reveal that most teachers perceive L1 as a useful pedagogical tool for clarifying difficult concepts, giving instructions, managing classroom discipline, and reducing learners' anxiety. However, they also express concern that excessive reliance on L1 may limit students' exposure to English and hinder the development of communicative competence. The novelty of this study lies in highlighting the nuanced perspectives of Indonesian EFL teachers, which demonstrate a balanced view between the practical necessity and the potential drawbacks of L1 use in ELT for young learners. The study concludes that strategic and judicious use of L1 can serve effective English learning, provided it is accompanied by opportunities for meaningful English exposure and practice.

Keywords

first language, ELT, Islamic young learners, teachers' perspectives, Indonesia

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PENDAHULUAN

The role of the first language (L1) in English Language Teaching (ELT) has long been contested within applied linguistics and language pedagogy. Traditional communicative approaches often discourage the use of L1, promoting instead full immersion in the second language (L2) (Cook, 2001). However, this "English-only" stance has been increasingly questioned, particularly in



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foreign language contexts where learners' exposure to English outside the classroom is extremely limited (Cummins, 2007). In such contexts, teachers and learners often rely on the native language to scaffold comprehension, reduce anxiety, and build connections between known and new linguistic knowledge (Bruen & Kelly, 2014).

Globally, evidence suggests that judicious L1 use can facilitate vocabulary acquisition, classroom management, and learner confidence. A meta-analysis by Kim, Lee, and Lee (2024) found that L1 glosses supported vocabulary retention more effectively than L2 glosses, especially among beginners. Similarly, Gablasova (2014) showed that learners who received L1 explanations retained specialized vocabulary more successfully than those who relied solely on L2 explanations. Beyond vocabulary, L1 also plays a role in lowering affective barriers. Zheng (2023) demonstrated that learners who planned oral tasks in L1 reported lower anxiety and performed better in fluency and accuracy compared to those who planned in L2. These findings highlight the potential benefits of integrating L1 as a mediational tool rather than viewing it as an impediment to L2 development.

In Indonesia, English is taught as a foreign language and is rarely used for daily communication, which limits learners' opportunities for authentic L2 practice (Kirkpatrick, 2012). This situation is particularly challenging for young learners, who often struggle with comprehension when English-only policies are strictly enforced (Ellis, 2015). Previous studies in Asian EFL contexts reveal that teachers frequently switch to L1 for clarifying instructions, teaching new vocabulary, and maintaining discipline (Hall & Cook, 2012). However, while international scholarship on teachers' beliefs about L1 use is growing, research that specifically investigates Indonesian EFL teachers' perspectives—particularly in Islamic elementary school settings remains limited.

Understanding teachers' perspectives is significant because teachers' beliefs and classroom practices shape how L1 is integrated into ELT (Borg, 2023). Exploring their views can shed light on how L1 use is negotiated between institutional expectations for English immersion and the practical needs of learners. Moreover, given that language anxiety is a key barrier for many young learners, understanding how teachers use L1 to reduce stress and increase participation is pedagogically valuable (Sparks & Alamer, 2022).

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on Indonesian EFL teachers working with young learners in Islamic elementary schools. By exploring how teachers perceive and implement L1 in classroom instruction, this study contributes new insights into context-sensitive ELT practices in Indonesia. Unlike previous research that often focused on either theoretical arguments or learner outcomes, this study highlights the nuanced perspectives of teachers who balance the benefits and

risks of L1 use in practice. These findings are expected to inform both local teaching practices and the broader debate on the role of L1 in foreign language education.

METODE

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design, which is appropriate for exploring teachers' beliefs, experiences, and practices in natural classroom contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The design allowed the researchers to gain in-depth insights into EFL teachers' perspectives on the use of first language (L1) in teaching English to young learners in the Indonesian context. The participants were 3 EFL teachers from Islamic elementary schools in Ponorogo. A purposive sampling technique was used to recruit participants, as they were considered information-rich cases due to their direct involvement in teaching English to young learners (Patton, 2015). The participants varied in teaching experience, ranging from novice to experienced teachers, which enabled diverse perspectives to be captured.

Semi-structured interviews and classroom observations were employed for the data collection methods. Semi-structured interviews is the interviews that were conducted individually with each teacher to explore their beliefs about the functions, benefits, and challenges of L1 use in ELT. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they provide flexibility while still ensuring consistency across participants (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Classroom observations: Observations were carried out in the teachers' English lessons to document how L1 was actually used in practice. This method enabled triangulation of the data, enhancing the validity of the findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim. Field notes were taken during classroom observations to capture non-verbal practices and contextual details.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. This involved familiarization with the data, coding, generating themes, reviewing, and defining themes to identify patterns across the data set. To ensure trustworthiness, the researchers employed triangulation of data sources, member checking with participants, and peer debriefing among colleagues (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Ethical approval was obtained from the research committee of Institut Agama Islam Riyadlotul Mujahidin. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was secured from all participants. Confidentiality was maintained by using pseudonyms and ensuring that no identifying details were disclosed in the reporting of results.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Ultimate way to explain subject matter

The participants revealed that when they encountered difficulties in conveying abstract concepts in English, they initially made several attempts to clarify using the target language. If these efforts were unsuccessful, they reluctantly turned to their first language (L1) to aid students' understanding. Their responses suggested that teachers were generally hesitant about using L1 in English instruction at the college level. Nevertheless, they admitted that practical challenges sometimes forced them to rely on it as a last option. Overall, all participants expressed negative attitudes toward the use of L1 in ELT. For instance, T1 noted that he usually tried to explain everything in English first, but when students struggled, he switched to Indonesian Language to ensure students' comprehension. Similarly, T2 emphasized that English should remain the main medium of instruction, with L1 employed only as a final resource when necessary. T3 also stated that while English should be consistently used in teaching, certain situations required the use of Indonesian language to maintain students' understanding.

The participants primarily used English as the medium of instruction in their teaching. Nonetheless, they indicated a readiness to fall back on Indonesian language when difficulties arose in delivering complex material. This practice reflects the perspective that the first language can function as a supportive mediational resource in language learning, especially during the early stages of acquisition. Cummins (2007) stated that the role of the first language (L1) is viewed as essential for supporting comprehension and facilitating students' learning processes. Notably, the participants acknowledged the importance of integrating L1, especially when introducing difficult or unfamiliar concepts. This recognition reflects the view that L1 can play a supportive role in improving students' comprehension and overall learning. At the same time, the participants expressed hesitation about its use, suggesting a possible top-down influence that limits teachers' autonomy. Such reluctance points to a tension between pedagogical perspectives that endorse L1 integration and institutional or cultural expectations that prioritize L2 immersion. To overcome these challenges, it is essential to equip teachers with targeted professional development that addresses the complexities of combining L1 and L2 in instruction. Creating a collaborative space for teachers to exchange strategies and experiences can further strengthen teaching practices. More broadly, these insights emphasize the need to achieve a balanced approach to L1 and L2 use in language education. Therefore, by responding to teachers' concerns and encouraging collaborative teaching practices, educators can effectively utilize L1 as a supportive tool while still preserving the focus on L2 immersion.

Way to facilitate the English weaknesses of students'

It is really needed to use L1 to teach underperforming learner. The data suggested that the extent of L1 use as a mediating tool varied based on the students' English proficiency level. Specifically, the

findings revealed that students with lower levels of English proficiency tended to depend more heavily on their L1 during EYL instruction. For example, “T3 conveyed L1 is not my first choice”. In my opinion, Indonesian as a comfortable tool when teaching English, perceiving that using Indonesian helps students feel more comfortable and supportive on their understanding of the English.” T1 also shared, “underperforming students, it is a complicated challenge to get them to understand difficult concepts in English. So, I use Indonesian more often to bridge that gap.” The findings highlight the significance of context-specific approaches in ELT, emphasizing the pivotal role of both L1 and L2 in facilitating effective language learning. Borg (2023) had previously emphasized the relationship of that contextual approach. This demonstrates the flexible character of language teaching practices, in which the extent of L1 use adjusts to learners’ English proficiency levels. Such a pattern aligns with Cummins’ framework, which posits that students with limited proficiency are more dependent on their first language.

Eventually, Using Indonesian develop students’ English comprehension and make low-level students being comfortable during the learning. Besides, the explanation of T1 that the challenge in conveying complex concepts in English to these students, leading to an increased use of L1, underscores the practical considerations inherent in EYL. The results highlight the need for pedagogical practices that are responsive to specific learning contexts, making careful use of both L1 and L2 to address students’ varying needs. This insight points to the value of flexible ELT strategies that recognize and utilize the interaction between learners’ proficiency levels and instructional methods. By adopting such context-sensitive approaches, teachers can foster more inclusive and effective classrooms, thereby supporting students’ language development and comprehension.

Way to make efficient time

Several teachers highlighted that they relied on L1 as a way to save time during instruction. For example, T1 explained that when students struggled to grasp a simple concept in English after two or three attempts, he would change to Indonesian to ensure their understanding. It is similar with T2, she stated “If students face prolonged difficulty with English, I ask them to use the native language when the struggle lasts for more than 5 minutes.” It is more efficient; they understand faster, and we can progress extensively. The results of this study show a pattern often found in second language teaching: many teachers use their students’ first language (L1) when needed to make learning smoother and easier to understand. This approach supports earlier research, such as Johnson and Swain (1997), which emphasizes that using the L1 in a careful and limited way can be very helpful, especially for explaining difficult ideas in the second language (L2). In the same way, Cook (2001) suggests that language teaching should take a balanced approach, where using the first language (L1) can be valuable, particularly for beginners. Still, some researchers disagree and hold different opinions on this issue.

A tool to interpret unfamiliar word

Using the first language (L1) can significantly help students comprehend unfamiliar words in a second language (L2) because it provides a clear and immediate link between known concepts and new vocabulary. When learners encounter difficult or unknown words, giving an L1 equivalent helps them quickly grasp meaning without the risk of misunderstanding, especially at the beginner level when their L2 knowledge is still limited. This reduces the cognitive load that comes from guessing meaning purely from context, allowing learners to focus more on remembering word forms and usage. Moreover, L1 use lowers anxiety and builds confidence, making it easier for students to engage with challenging texts or tasks. Research supports this view; for example, Kim, Lee, and Lee (2024) found in their meta-analysis that L1 glosses were more effective than L2 glosses for vocabulary learning, particularly for beginners. Similarly, Gablasova (2014) showed that L1 explanations supported both initial learning and long-term retention of specialized vocabulary, while Goh (2006) observed that learners used L1 as a tool to check meaning and reduce frustration during reading. These findings demonstrate that the careful and judicious use of L1 can be a powerful scaffold in helping students comprehend and retain unfamiliar L2 words.

Way to improve students' English achievement

This study highlights how teachers often use the first language (L1) in second language (L2) classrooms as a practical way to support learning, which is consistent with many other studies in language education. Similar to the findings of Brown (2007), the results show that L1 can be an effective tool to help students understand and stay engaged in L2 lessons. Brown pointed out that L1 acts as a bridge, linking new and sometimes difficult L2 material with what students already know, making the learning process smoother and more meaningful—an idea also confirmed in this study. The study also revealed that teachers recognize the usefulness of L1 in supporting vocabulary learning, clarifying difficult ideas, and refocusing students' attention—an observation consistent with Ellis's (1994) findings. Therefore, the application of L1 will contribute to the students language comprehension and it will affect to the achievement of students.

Ways to support teacher and cover their weaknesses

Most teachers admitted that they relied on their first language (L1) whenever teaching in the second language (L2) became difficult. They described it as a kind of safety net or reliable tool that helps them manage those moments. In such cases, they would naturally shift to L1 to handle challenges in L2 instruction. As T1 explained, L1 serves as an essential support that helps teachers deal with their own limitations in L2, functioning like a backup resource that enables them to overcome difficult situations. Teachers sometimes rely on L1 because it provides a safety net when they are less confident in their

own L2 skills. Using students' native language helps the teacher avoid having to produce sophisticated explanations or use complex L2 vocabulary or grammar that they might themselves be unsure about. This way, the teacher can still manage the classroom, explain difficult points, maintain control, and avoid mistakes or gaps in their L2 knowledge. For example, in a study of UK secondary school teachers, Mitchell (1988) found that many teachers felt guilty when they resorted to L1 because using it seemed like a sign of low proficiency in L2 and less professional. Using L1 in the classroom was seen not as something harmful for students, but as a safeguard to keep communication flowing while teachers worked on improving their L2 skills. This supports Johnson's (2003) argument that L1 can act as an important aid for teachers facing difficulties in L2 instruction. His study highlighted that teachers turn to L1 not to disadvantage learners but to make sure understanding and interaction continue smoothly as they strengthen their L2 competence. Likewise, the idea of L1 as a safety net reflects Bandura's (1997) theory of teacher self-efficacy, which suggests that people adopt strategies that boost their confidence and ability in difficult situations. From this perspective, teachers' reliance on L1 can be viewed as a way to increase their effectiveness in teaching L2 while still supporting their students' learning.

Reducing students' language anxiety

The study showed that teachers used their native language in the classroom for different reasons and situations. A key reason shared by many was the belief that using L1 is essential when decreasing the students anxiety in L2 and giving optimal choice for students in language learning. In the teaching activity, T2 said that "the participants noted that when they faced challenges in explaining abstract concepts in English, they tended to make several attempts to clarify the concept using their L1." Using students' first language (L1) in the L2 classroom can help lower anxiety and improve performance because it provides both emotional support and cognitive relief. When learners are required to function entirely in L2, they may feel overwhelmed by unfamiliar words and structures, which can raise anxiety and discourage participation. Allowing the use of L1 at strategic moments—such as clarifying complex grammar, explaining vocabulary, or planning speech—creates a sense of security and reduces the pressure of constant L2 use. This not only lowers anxiety but also encourages students to take risks and engage more actively in classroom communication. Research has shown that judicious use of L1 can decrease cognitive overload and help learners feel more comfortable in language learning environments (Bruen & Kelly, 2014). Similarly, a recent study demonstrated that learners who planned their speaking tasks in L1 performed better in fluency, accuracy, and syntactic complexity, and also reported less anxiety compared to those who planned in L2 (Zheng, 2023). Furthermore, longitudinal evidence suggests that strong L1 skills indirectly reduce L2 anxiety because they support higher achievement and confidence in L2 learning (Sparks & Alamer, 2022). These findings confirm that using L1 can serve as a valuable tool for fostering both emotional well-being and stronger performance in L2 classrooms.

CONCLUSION

A detailed analysis of teachers' use of their first language (L1) in second language (L2) classrooms reveals several findings that illustrate the complexity of language teaching and the strategic role of L1 in supporting L2 learning. The findings highlight that teachers often turn to L1 as a final option when clarifying L2 concepts, showing the practical nature of classroom instruction. L1 is also used as a supportive tool for learners with limited English proficiency, demonstrating teachers' adaptability to students' needs. Moreover, it functions as an efficient strategy to save time, especially when explaining challenging L2 material. Beyond comprehension, L1 is utilized to reduce students anxiety in using L2 and to introduce new vocabulary, thereby fostering engagement and aiding lexical development. Taken together, these insights emphasize the layered character of language instruction, where an integrated approach combining L1 and L2 proves vital to effective L2 learning. Although teachers aim to maintain L2 immersion, the strategic inclusion of L1 offers practical benefits by improving understanding, optimizing instructional time, and accommodating varied learner backgrounds. This balanced practice illustrates the dual focus of language teaching: upholding pedagogical ideals while ensuring practical effectiveness to achieve meaningful educational outcomes.

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