



The Frequency and Functions of Teachers' Use of L1 in EFL Classrooms

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Abstract

This paper reports the frequency and functions of L1 teachers used in EFL classrooms. A questionnaire was used to collect data from 115 EFL teachers working in primary and secondary schools in Thailand. The findings showed that the teachers' years of teaching had an impact on their responses. The teachers with less experience never used L1 in dealing with classroom management problems in class and in giving individual help to learners. They also never used L1 to explain feedback and explain learners' errors. The more experienced teachers never used L1 for many more situations. The findings have implications for approaches to EFL classrooms and further discussion on reflective teaching practices.

Keywords: frequency, functions of L1 use EFL classrooms

Introduction

Throughout the 20th century, professional and methodological discussion and debate within English language teaching assumed that English is best taught and learned without the use of the students' own language. However, recently, this English-only assumption has been increasingly questioned, and the role of native language use is being reassessed (Hall & Cook, 2013), especially in foreign language contexts where the classroom is the main or only source of students' exposure to the target language and learners aim to use the language mainly in monolingual target language situations. It is not on 'majority language' contexts such as ESL in

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Australia or the USA, where bilingual competence is a goal or the exclusion of a learner's L1 may have negative influences on his or her sense of well-being and identity (Littlewood & Yu, 2009). Although maximizing L2 exposure has been supported in mainstream literature for more than one hundred years, many educational contexts continue to employ learners' L1 in foreign language learning (Hall & Cook, 2012).

Butzkamm and Caldwell (2009) suggest that to balance using L1 and L2 in the EFL classrooms, teachers can use sandwich technique to compensate for the limitations of using L2. Macaro (1997) suggests that pedagogical value in facilitating L2 learning beyond exclusive L2 use is a perspective identified as the 'optimal position'. Central to this perspective is the concept of optimal use, defined as 'code switching in broadly communicative classrooms which can enhance second language acquisition and proficiency better than second language exclusivity.

Pedagogic arguments for L1 use include conveying meaning, explaining grammar, and organizing the class (Cook 2001). Alshehri (2017) classifies pedagogic functions in terms of teachers' use of L1 in the classroom which is, assessing their students, giving feedback, correcting spoken errors, and giving instructions. Kohi and Suvarna Lakshmi (2021) identify functions including four categories which are language functionality, managerial functionality, affective functionality, and social functionality. A number of studies highlight the judicious use of L1 in teaching L2. A range of recent research provides considerable detail to be able to make a set of recommendations aimed at the judicious use of L1 in support of L2 learning (e.g. Wei 2018; García and Kleyn 2016; Tian and Hennebry 2016; Zhao and Macaro 2016; Liu and Zeng 2015;) Cook (2001) describes four factors to consider about the judicious use of L1. The first factor is efficiency; can something be done more effectively through the L1? The second factor is learning: will L2 learning be helped by using the L1 alongside the L2? The third factor is naturalness; do the participants feel more comfortable about some functions or topics in the first language rather than the second language? The fourth factor is external relevance; will use of both languages help learners master specific L2 uses they may need in the world beyond the classroom?

The researcher reviewed use of L1 in EFL classrooms within an Asian context and found that Nanda (2021) reviewed research concerning teachers' perceptions of using L1 in EFL classrooms. The result showed that L1 could be used in teaching grammar, vocabulary, and giving instructions. Teachers perceived the use of L1 in teaching English in three positions



including virtual, maximal, and optimal position. This may be beneficial for the educational stakeholders of EFL teachers for the use of L1 to be specifically defined in context. Macmillan and Rivers (2011) surveyed 29 native-English speaker teachers at a Japanese university where the exclusive use of the target language is promoted as a key feature of the optimal foreign language learning environment. Results indicated that, contrary to the official policy, many teachers believed that selective use of the students' L1, by the teacher or by students, could enhance L2 learning in various ways within a communicative framework. The authors argued that teachers and students themselves are best suited to determine, based on the immediate context of the classroom, what constitutes optimal use of the target language and L1. Since teachers are best suited to decide what is appropriate for their own classrooms, allowing for and acknowledging the differences in perspectives may emerge as a result of contextual factors. The present study therefore explored the frequency and functions of teachers' use L1 in EFL classrooms in Thai context.

Exploring functions of L1 use

Hall and Cook (2013) surveyed functions for which teachers are more or less likely to use the L1 in L2 classrooms. Two thousand, seven hundred eighty-five primary, secondary and tertiary teachers working in 111 countries responded to the questionnaire. The majority of teachers who participated in the survey reported using L1 *sometimes* (30.1 percent), *often* (25.7 percent) or *always* (16.2 percent) to explain when meanings in English are unclear; likewise, a total of 61.5 percent of participants also explained vocabulary via L1 *sometimes*, *often* or *always*. Over half the teachers in the survey reported a similarly frequent use of L1 to explain grammar (58.1 percent of responses), to develop rapport and a good classroom atmosphere (53.2 percent) and to maintain discipline. Tanrıseven (2021) explored the opinion of L1 use by primary and secondary school teachers in Turkey. The findings showed that for academic functional categories, teachers agreed most to "students can understand English grammar better when explained in Turkish" with the highest mean (X: 3.55). For managerial functional categories agreement was highest as "use of Turkish helps students understand the teacher's instructions more easily (X: 3.21). And for social/affective functional categories, teachers mostly agreed that "Use of Turkish lowers students' stress and anxiety. Orfan and Noori (2022) explored the frequency use and functions of L1 in L2 classes in Afghanistan. It



was found that EFL instructors frequently used L1 to explain complicated grammatical points and new vocabulary and clarify difficult concepts. The EFL instructors sometimes used L1 to explain L1 & L2 differences, check students' comprehension, provide feedback, discuss assignments, translate passages, and give instructions. Very few studies explored the frequency and functions of teachers' use of L1 in EFL classes in the context of Thailand. Only one current study was found, that of Limtrairat and Aksornjarung (2015), who explored the frequency of secondary school teachers using Thai language in EFL classrooms. It was found that the teachers (95.51%) used Thai language in EFL classrooms at the frequent level ($X = 3.51$, $S.D. = 0.63$).

Method

Participants

The participants were 115 EFL teachers working in primary and secondary schools in Thailand. Of the 115 participants, 28 were male and 87 were female. They had a minimum of 1 year to a maximum of 10 years of teaching experience. The participants' ages ranged from 24 years to 35 years.

Data collection and analysis

In this study the researcher used an online survey. The main benefit of the online survey was that the survey increased productivity by saving time for the researcher. While developing and operationalizing an online questionnaire survey, the data can be collected and analyzed with the help of survey tools. The teachers were asked to respond to a questionnaire online. The questionnaire was aimed to explore the frequency and functions of the teachers using L1 in EFL classrooms. The questionnaire was designed in two parts. In the first part, it was aimed to ascertain teachers' gender and how long they have been working as a teacher. The second part consisted of 21 statements put in the five following choices: always, usually, sometimes, seldom, never. The data was analyzed to find out the frequency and functions of teachers' using L1 in EFL classrooms based on the length of teaching experience.



Findings

To determine the frequencies and percentages from the questionnaires, 5 choices were used: always, usually, sometimes, seldom, and never. This was aimed to survey the frequency and functions of teachers' using L1 in EFL classrooms. The following tables are findings from the study.

Table 1 Percent of teachers with 1-5 years' experience used L1 for language functions in EFL classrooms.

L 1 functions in EFL classrooms	Aways %	Usually %	Sometimes %	Seldom %	Never %
1. I use L1 to teach vocabulary.	5.76	30.77	23.08	28.85	9.62
2. I employ L1 to explain grammar.	17.31	28.85	38.46	11.54	1.92
3. I use L 1 to provide clarification when learners do not understand in L2.	19.23	44.23	21.15	9.62	3.85
4. I use L 1 to explain feedback and explain learners' errors.	23.08	40.38	21.15	13.46	0.00
5. I use L 1 in giving written corrective feedback on learners' compositions.	25.00	32.69	21.15	13.46	5.77
6. I use L 1 to explain instruction for assignments or projects.	15.38	19.23	30.77	25	7.69
7. I use L 1 to negotiate the syllabus and the lesson.	19.23	30.77	28.85	15.38	3.85
8. I use L 1 in administrative issues like exam announcement.	21.15	34.62	19.23	15.38	7.69
9. I use L 1 in dealing with discipline problems in class.	25.00	25.00	36.54	11.54	0.00



L 1 functions in EFL classrooms	Aways %	Usually %	Sometimes %	Seldom %	Never %
10. I use L 1 to establish or assert authority.	21.15	25	30.77	17.31	3.85
11. I use L 1 at the end of the class to answer possible questions.	17.31	23.08	30.77	15.38	11.54
12. I use L 1 to encourage and comfort learners.	9.62	30.77	30.77	19.23	7.69
13. I use L 1 to build rapport with learners.	17.31	25	30.77	11.54	13.46
14. I use L 1 in giving personal comments.	21.15	42.31	17.31	15.38	1.92
15. I use L 1 in making humorous comments.	28.85	23.08	28.85	13.46	3.85
16. I use L 1 in presenting information about target culture, in particular discussing cross-cultural issues.	9.62	32.69	30.77	17.31	7.69
17. I use L 1 to supervise and guide learners when they perform a task collaboratively.	7.69	25	32.69	25	7.69
18. I use L 1 to conduct pre-task activities such as pre-listening and pre speaking.	3.85	21.15	30.77	30.77	11.54
19. I use L 1 in giving individual help to learners.	19.23	40.38	25	13.46	0.00
20. I use L 1 to save time in lengthy task explanations.	21.15	30.77	19.23	19.23	7.69
21. I use L 1 in making contrast between L1 and L2.	15.38	30.77	34.62	13.46	3.85
Average%	17.31	30.31	27.75	16.94	5.77



According to the questionnaire results presented in table 1, the majority of teachers with 1–5 years teaching experience reported that they “usually” used L1 in their classrooms (30.31 percent). When examining the results of *always*, it appears that the least number of teachers used L1 to conduct pre-task activities (3.85 percent). Most of the teachers used L1 in making humorous comments (28.85 percent). For the *usually* option, the least number of teachers used L1 to explain instruction for assignments or projects (19.23 percent) and the most number of teachers used L1 to provide clarification when learners did not understand in L2 (44.23 percent). For the *sometimes* option, the least of teachers used L1 in giving personal comments (17.31 percent). The greatest number of teachers used L1 to explain grammar (38.46 percent). For the *seldom* option, the least number of teachers used L1 to provide clarification when learners do not understand in L2 (9.62 percent). The greatest number of teachers used L1 to conduct pre-task activities such as pre-listening and pre-speaking (30.77 percent). Interestingly, the teachers reported they *never* used L1 in dealing with discipline problems in class and in giving individual help to learners. They also never use L1 to explain feedback and explain learners’ errors.

Table 2 Percent of teachers with 6-10 years' experience used L1 for language functions in EFL classrooms.

L 1 functions in EFL classrooms	Always %	Usually %	Sometimes %	Seldom %	Never %
1. I use L1 to teach vocabulary.	1.59	33.33	47.62	15.87	1.59
2. I employ L1 to explain grammar.	15.87	34.92	39.68	9.52	0.00
3. I use L1 to provide clarification when learners do not understand in L2.	19.05	41.27	31.74	7.94	0.00
4. I use L1 to explain feedback and explain their errors.	23.81	39.68	30.16	6.34	0.00
5. I use L1 in giving written corrective feedback on learners’ compositions.	19.05	31.75	36.51	9.52	3.17



L 1 functions in EFL classrooms	Aways %	Usually %	Sometimes %	Seldom %	Never %
6. I use L1 to explain instruction for assignments or projects.	12.70	26.98	42.86	14.29	3.17
7. I use L1 to negotiate the syllabus and the lesson.	15.87	34.92	31.75	15.87	1.59
8. I use L1 in administrative issues like exam announcement.	17.46	42.86	23.81	14.29	1.59
9. I use L1 in dealing with discipline problems in class.	20.63	39.68	28.57	11.11	0.00
10. I use L1 to establish or assert authority.	11.11	30.16	44.44	12.70	1.59
11. I use L1 at the end of the class to answer possible questions.	11.11	42.86	26.98	15.87	3.17
12. I use L1 to encourage and comfort learners.	11.11	28.57	33.33	22.22	4.76
13. I use L1 to build rapport with learners.	9.52	33.33	36.51	20.63	0.00
14. I use L1 in giving personal comments.	17.46	28.57	39.68	12.70	1.59
15. I use L1 in making humorous comments.	9.52	33.33	39.68	14.29	3.17
16. I use L1 in presenting information about target culture, in particular discussing cross-cultural issues.	17.46	30.16	33.33	15.87	3.17
17. I use L1 to supervise and guide learners when they perform a task collaboratively.	14.29	28.57	36.51	17.46	3.17
18. I use L1 to conduct pre-task activities such as pre-listening and pre speaking.	7.94	23.81	42.86	19.05	6.34
19. I use L1 in giving individual help to learners.	25.40	23.81	39.68	9.52	1.59
20. I use L1 to save time in lengthy task explanations.	14.29	26.98	38.10	15.87	4.76
21. I use L1 in making contrast between L1 and L2.	15.87	30.16	33.33	14.29	6.34
Average%	14.81	32.65	36.05	14.06	2.42



According to the questionnaire results presented in table 2, the majority of teachers with 6–10 years teaching experience reported that they *sometimes* used L1 in their classrooms (36.05 percent). When examining the results of *always*, it appears that the fewest number of teachers used L1 to teach vocabulary (1.59 percent). The greatest number of teachers used L1 in giving individual help to learners (25.40 percent). For the *usually* option, the least of teachers used L1 in giving individual help to learners (23.81 percent). The greatest number of teachers used L1 at the end of the class to answer possible questions and in dealing with discipline problems in class (42.86 percent). For the *sometimes* option, the least of teachers used L1 at the end of the class to answer possible questions (26.98 percent). The greatest number of teachers used L1 to establish or assert authority (44.44 percent). For the *seldom* option, the least number of teachers used L1 to explain feedback and explain their errors (6.34 percent). The greatest number of teachers used L1 to encourage and comfort learners (22.22 percent). The teachers reported they never used L1 to provide clarification when learners did not understand in L2; to explain feedback and explain their errors; to build rapport with learners; and in dealing with discipline problems in class.

Conclusion and discussion

In this study, the researcher explored the frequency and functions the primary and secondary school teachers used L1 in EFL classrooms. It was found that the average of teachers with 1–5 years teaching experience reported that they “usually” used L1 in their classrooms. When examining the results of “always”, it appears that the least of teachers used L1 to conduct pre-task activities. The greatest number of teachers used L1 in making humorous comments. For the “usually” option, the least of teachers used L1 to explain instruction for assignments or projects. The most of teachers used L1 to provide clarification when learners do not understand in L2. For the “sometimes” option, the least of teachers used L1 in giving personal comments. The greatest number of teachers used L1 to explain grammar. For the “seldom” option, the least number of teachers used L1 to provide clarification when learners do not understand in. The greatest number of teachers used L1 to conduct pre-task activities such as pre-listening and pre-speaking. Interestingly, the teachers reported they never used L1



in dealing with discipline problems in class and in giving individual help to learners. They also never use L1 to explain feedback and explain learners' errors.

For teachers with 6–10 year teaching experience, it was found that the average number of teachers reported that they sometimes used L1 in the classrooms. According to the questionnaire results presented in table 2, the majority of teachers with 6–10 years teaching experience reported that they “sometimes” used L1 in their classrooms. When examining the results of “always”, it appears that the least number of teachers used L1 to teach vocabulary. The greatest number of teachers used L1 in giving individual help to learners. For “usually” option, the least of teachers used L1 in giving individual help to learners. The greatest number of teachers used L1 at the end of the class to answer possible questions, and in dealing with discipline problems in class. For the “sometimes” option, the least of teachers used L1 at the end of the class to answer possible questions. The most of teachers used L1 to establish or assert authority. For the “seldom” option, the least number of teachers used L1 to explain feedback and explain their errors. The most of teachers used L1 to encourage and comfort learners. The teachers reported they never used L1 to provide clarification when learners did not understand in L2; to explain feedback and explain their errors; to build rapport with learners; and in dealing with discipline problems in class.

The findings showed that the teachers' number of years of teaching had an impact on their responses. The teachers with 1–5 years teaching experience used L1 more frequently in EFL classes than the teachers with 6–10 years teaching experience. This may be due to experienced teachers having acquired non-language and language skills that equipped them with techniques to avoid L1 unless necessary. The interesting point found in this study was that both groups of teachers never used L1 in dealing with discipline problems in class and in giving individual help to learners. They never used L1 to explain feedback and explain learners' errors; to provide clarification when learners do not understand in L2; to explain feedback and explain their errors; or to build rapport with learners. The findings of this study are inconsistent with the findings of previous studies and principles of using L1 in L2 classrooms. In terms of principles of using L1, as mentioned in the introduction part, Cook (2001) has four guidelines to consider regarding the best judicious use of L1. The first factor is



efficiency. For example, L1 may help present the meanings of abstract and complicated vocabulary items in a less time consuming but more effective manner. The second factor is learning. Learning subjunctive moods or abstract ideas could be facilitated by using L1 explanations. The third factor is naturalness. It may be easier for teachers to create an environment of rapport by showing concern for their students in L1 than it would be in the L2. These findings are not in parallel with those of the research by Hall and Cook (2013), Tanriseven (2021), Orfan and Noori (2022). The majority of teachers reported that they frequently used L1 to develop rapport and a good classroom atmosphere and to maintain discipline, help students understand the teacher's instructions more easily, lower students' stress and anxiety, clarify difficult concepts and provide feedback. The researcher assumes that the teachers possibly used other strategies to avoid using L1, for example the teachers use communicative strategies such as approximation, word coinage and circumlocution. However, other data collecting techniques including interviews and classroom observation should be used to gain a deeper insight about L1 use in EFL classrooms in Thailand. More studies on a larger sample are also recommended.

Additionally, teacher professional development needs to assist teachers who are struggling with judicious use of L1/L2. Workshops are a great way to develop teachers which include a discussion of bilingual education, and triangulating possible functions of L1 use, with teachers sharing their reasoning for the judicious use of L1. This would help EFL teachers to become empowered and have agency for their teaching.

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