

Students' attitudes towards teacher's use of Vietnamese in EFL classrooms at Vietnam National University Hanoi, International School

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ABSTRACT

The role of L1 in L2 classrooms has without any doubt been the hot topic of debates and discussions. In particular, some linguists and educators do not support the use of L1 in teaching L2, whereas others emphasize the importance of L1 in L2 classes. Although studies have been done on both teachers' and students' attitudes toward L1 use in the L2 classroom, it still remains the question of when and how L1 can become an effective supporting tool for L2. The goal of this research is to present the results on the functionality of L1 (Vietnamese language) in L2 (EFL) classrooms under students' perspectives. A survey questionnaire was designed to deliver to participants for the study: 126 students at the intermediate level of the General English program at Vietnam National University Hanoi, International School (VNU-IS). The study's findings indicated that the VNU-IS student participants were satisfied with their teacher's use of L1. L1 usage was also discovered to be preferred for the following purposes: language functionality, managerial functionality, effective functionality, and social functionality. Among them, language functionality is most favored by VNU-IS students. The results also revealed that Vietnamese should be considered as a backup rather than a barrier for Vietnamese teachers.

Keywords: *L1, L2, Vietnamese language, English language, VNU-IS, functionality, EFL*

Introduction

The importance of the mother tongue (L1) in the foreign language (L2) classroom has always been a debatable topic among educators, teachers, and learners. At first, the Bilingual Approach made its day with the prosperity of the Grammar Translation Method. Then, as a result of the widespread usage of L2, the Grammar Translation Method lost its popularity and was quickly replaced by other Monolingual Approaches including the Audio-Lingual Method, Communicative Language Teaching, etc. Initially, this new technique seemed to rule out the usage of L1 in an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) environment.

With the passage of time, however, theories and discussions in the area of ELT came to justify the usage of L1 in an EFL classroom. There are ongoing debates about whether or not L1 should be utilized in an EFL course. A lot of studies have gone into determining whether L1 usage should be encouraged or discouraged. The perspectives of teachers, students, and administrators are investigated. It is now obvious that L1 has made a comeback in the EFL classroom.

Despite the belief in the benefits of using L1 in L2 classes sparingly, there does not appear to be a set of circumstances in which it should be employed. As a result, it is up to the language teacher to decide when, why, and how to employ it. Moreover, the situations in which L1 should be utilized in a foreign language lesson appear to be determined by the various characteristics of language classrooms.

Literature review

The history of language education has seen a variety of approaches and teaching methods that have viewed L1 usage in the L2 classroom positively or negatively. Protesters claim that using L1 in L2 classrooms makes it difficult for the target language (TL) acquisition, while supporters believe in the effectiveness of L1 in a foreign language lesson. Some academics, nevertheless, adopt a neutral viewpoint, stating that the use of the mother tongue should neither be prohibited nor promoted.

Support for Monolingual Approach

Proponents of the Monolingual Approach believe that the more exposure learners have to the TL, the better the learning outcome will be. This claim is seen as fundamental to the monolingual approach. One of the pioneers in advancing the Monolingual Approach was Krashen, who pushed for maximal exposure to the target language in the foreign language classroom. Krashen (1985) believed in the close relationship between L2 usage and language proficiency. The Monolingual Method and the Direct Method's core concept is that "second language learning resembles first language acquisition, requiring plenty of oral engagement, very little grammatical analysis, and no translation" (Brown, 1994, p. 21).

First, the maximum use of TL will create an artificial learning environment for learners to use it effectively. In real-life cases, learners have to use L2 when they have to communicate totally in L2 without any interpreter when they have to read a book without any dictionary to support them. Also, L2 learners do not have much time and environment to use L2 outside their classroom, so it is undeniable that the teacher should maximize the use of TL during class time.

According to Duff and Polio (1990), there is a widespread notion in a normal foreign language classroom that complete competence in the TL is obtained by the instructor offering a rich target language environment. L1 becomes a barrier, an interference in the learning process. Macaro (1997) discovers that teachers do not find any pedagogical advantage in employing the learner's first language and that it is "clearly something that gets in the way of L2 learning" (p. 29). This is the strength that native speaker teachers have over non-native ones because they successfully

create a standardized learning environment for their students, where TL is exposed, practiced, and absorbed.

Another advantage of the Monolingual Approach is added for classroom management purposes. If there is any chance for students to use their mother tongue, they will use it for non-academic purposes, too. To illustrate, they can have off-topic discussions or create useless noise in the EFL classroom. It is agreed among EFL teachers that the “English only” rule is really effective in shaping discipline for students. Ellis (1985) emphasizes the significance of employing the TL for both linguistics and classroom management purposes. He claims that the teacher desires to correct students' mistakes and misbehavior immediately with the support of L1 to reach the short-term objectives of the lesson; however, by doing so, they refuse the valuable L2 input.

Thirdly, the use of TL will boost students' confidence and encouragement to express themselves. Students will realize that they are losing many opportunities to practice their TL if they are interrupted by their L1. Littlewood (1992, p. 45) claims that if teachers stop using the TL in the classroom, students would lose faith in the foreign language they are studying as a viable form of communication. It is only after they have used it that they recognize its value. Apparently, Turnbull (2018) states that L1 use in the L2 classroom will make learners lazy and over-reliant. They cannot control their learning process without getting support from teachers or a dictionary. Things become worse when students do not want to listen to explanations because they know teachers will provide them with the equivalent meaning of the words, the phrases, or the sentence if there is any complaint about comprehension.

Moreover, the use of TL will surely improve learners' critical thinking skills. It is the fact that any direct interpretation or direct translation may lead to oversimplification, and that one word may have more than one meaning, one sentence may mean differently in the varied situation, and some words and phrases do not have their exact equivalence in their mother tongue. Proponents of the Monolingual Method argue that translating between L1 and L2 is risky because it reinforces the notion that the languages are comparable one to one, which is not necessarily the case (Pacek, 2003). Keeping L1 and L2 separate is therefore necessary to avoid any misunderstanding that may cause. Pham (2021) believes that while the variations in cultural and pragmatic elements that affect language use and translation are not sufficiently researched, errors in spelling, grammar, and lexical meanings may be produced by the negative interference of the source language.

To add to this, Phillipson (1992) states two comparable philosophies: "English is best taught monolingually," and "The ideal English teacher is a native English speaker" (p. 185). According to these viewpoints, a native speaker instructor can support learning better than a non-native speaker one.

Support for Bilingual Approach

Since the Monolingual Method has had apparent weaknesses and has been put under investigation and suspected of its efficiency, the push to promote the use of L1 in EFL classrooms has grown again. As a result, the bilingual strategy has evolved. It has been

acknowledged by studies throughout the years that the usage of L1 in the L2 classroom is a beneficial process. Educators and teachers believe that L1 is a useful tool and valuable source to approach foreign language acquisition.

First, the use of L1 is a natural phenomenon. In fact, switching from a foreign language to a native language happens naturally among all language learners, and translation is a natural procedure. L1 and L2 always exist simultaneously, so it is ideal to let them support each other to reach learning objectives. Cook (2001) proposes that teachers capitalize on the many L1-L2 connections that students naturally form in their heads by emphasizing the similarities and distinctions between L1 and L2. According to Turnbull (2001), maximizing the TL does not and should not imply that teachers should not use L1 in their lessons; instead, it means that the L1 and L2 may help at the same time. Cummins (2007) is convinced that L2 is an assistant, not an enemy of L1 proficiency, and exposure itself is not enough to reach learning objectives. The help of L2 will help the teacher and students realize the lesson's aims faster and more effectively. Learning a second language should enrich the learner's life rather than diminish their native language and culture. Allowing L1 usage would give students the impression that learning another language is enjoyable. They can have access to a valued resource that supports them, and they won't feel bad about doing what comes easily to them.

Second, L1 is a necessary tool for successful language acquisition. According to Krashen (1981), exposure to understandable material is essential for language learning. If learners are unable to comprehend what has been spoken, they will be unable to complete a task or remember it in their minds. He also claims that high-quality bilingual education gives learners knowledge and literacy in their native language, which helps them learn English in an indirect but strong way. Also, many complicated grammatical points are difficult to explain in TL. According to Pachler and Field (2001), L1 can help teachers present a great number of grammatical points, particularly through the use of physical or visual displays. Similarly, Mohebbi and Alavi (2014) investigated 72 Iranian EFL instructors and discovered that they utilize the learners' native language, Persian, to fulfill different purposes including presenting new words, teaching new grammatical structures, doing classroom management, and giving feedback. This study found that L1 is undeniably used in the classroom and identified its roles.

Thirdly, the use of L1 facilitates teacher-student, and student-student communication and relationship. It eases learner's anxiety and negative psychological issues. Exclusion of students' first language is a critique of the language, according to Nation (1990), this deterioration has a negative psychological impact on the learners. By citing favorable outcomes from recent research on L1 use in ESL classes, Auerbach (1993) argues that the bilingual strategy is not only successful but also required for adult EFL students. In her research, she discovered that using L1 had a positive effect on decreasing pupils' anxiety levels and other emotional obstacles. It is a common situation in an EFL classroom that students keep silent or do not dare to say, and there is tension between teachers and learners. Burden (2000) taught his lessons using the "English exclusively" rule but he admits that he felt "distant" from the pupils as individuals since there was little natural conversational engagement in English. However, if

EFL teachers could create a close relationship with their students by giving them a sense of comfort, and employing their real-life experience in their native language, they would be relaxed to express themselves and take their chance with English.

Additionally, integrating L1 into L2 classes encourages cooperative learning. Some discussions in the native language are necessary for pair work and group work, which will help students figure out the problems better and find the answers faster. When there is room for L1 to exist, students will be more confident to express their viewpoints, to support their friends which surely facilitates the learning process. The time saved by speaking in the mother language may be spent on more productive tasks. Gaebler (2014) said in research that teachers teaching advanced learners can use translanguaging simply to keep up with the flow of the conversation and make it apparent for the listeners to understand the message being conveyed, as well as to cope with a lexis deficit.

Research Questions

The following research issues will be addressed in this study:

Question 1: What teaching approach do VNU-IS students prefer, a monolingual approach or a bilingual approach?

Question 2: In what functionalities are the use of Vietnamese in ELT classrooms proved to be effective/useful?

Question 3: How much can students benefit from lecturers using Vietnamese in the listening, speaking, reading, and writing lessons?

Methods

Pedagogical Setting & Participants

In Vietnam, currently, most schools and English teaching centers follow the model of a combination of foreign teachers (NEST) and Vietnamese teachers (Non-NEST), or foreign teachers (NEST) and Vietnamese teaching assistants (TA) in their EFL classrooms. At Vietnam National University Hanoi, International School (VNU-IS), this model has also been developed and applied to the General English Program. The NEST and Non-NEST ratio 1:4 which means one foreign teacher work with four other Vietnamese teachers to cover the teaching of reading skill, listening skill, speaking skill, and writing skill has been applied consistently since the foundation of the program at VNU-IS.

The consideration was done to discover the qualities of Vietnamese teachers with different functionalities of the teaching and learning process such as language functionality, managerial functionality, effective functionality, and social functionality.

The Preparatory Year Program at VNU-IS, where the research was conducted offers intense English classes to provide students with the English academic skills they will need to pursue their prospective majors at the university. Students take an English placement exam after being

accepted to university, which places them in courses based on their competence level: elementary, pre-intermediate, intermediate, or upper-intermediate.

The study was conducted on 126 first-year students at the intermediate level. These 126 students are studying in level 3 (out of 4 levels) of the General English program at VNU-IS.

Design of the Study

The goal of this study was to evaluate the attitudes of students about the usage of their teacher's L1 in an EFL classroom, hence a quantitative study approach was adopted. A systematic questionnaire was created to address the participant groups' ideas and experiences. The researcher employed a questionnaire to perform this study, which was handed to 126 students at VNU-IS. Several parts of the questionnaire were adapted from Kafes (2011) and Kohi and Suvarna Lakshmi (2020).

Data collection & analysis

The questionnaire was designed to collect quantitative data. It was based on two studies:

- 1) Hüseyin KAFES (2011). A neglected resource or an overvalued illusion: L1 use in the foreign language classroom.
- 2) Kohi, M. & Suvarna Lakshmi, G. (2020). Use of L1 in ESL/EFL Classroom: Multinational Teachers' Perceptions and Attitudes.

The participants were requested to complete a two-sectioned questionnaire. In the first part, they were questioned about their demographics, learning experiences, and their current language proficiency. A mix of multiple choice and five-point Likert scale questions was included in the second part. These statements fall into four categories that may be used to investigate the functionality of L1 usage: language functionality, managerial functionality, effective functionality, and social functionality.

Findings

Question 1: What teaching approach do VNU-IS students prefer, a monolingual approach or a bilingual approach?

Students' preferable approach



Chart 1. Preferable approach

A majority of students (92%) supported the bilingual approach in EFL classrooms with the use of both Vietnamese and English. They believed that the lecturers’ smooth combination and transition between L1 and L2 were beneficial for them in the process of learning the target language. Only 10 students (8%) believed that an English-only environment is better for them in mastering their English.

Why did the majority of surveyed students approve of the use of Vietnamese in EFL classrooms? The first reason is related to students' language proficiency. Their English is only at an intermediate level, and they were so familiar with the use of their mother tongue in all classes including EFL classes. Moreover, these students' target was to pass the Aptis exam at the B2 level. Aptis is a level test, which means on one exam you can score between A2 and C. The Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking parts have a similar structure while Grammar and Vocabulary go together. Students thought they benefited more from teachers using Vietnamese to provide an explanation, give feedback, or give exam tips. It was easier to understand and it saved time. Another reason that explains why VNU-IS students welcome the use of L1 is the result of differences in learning factors of L2. Hoang (2021) made a literature review of some studies on L2 learning to find out how people learn L2 differently and how the various aspects relate to one another. He made a conclusion that the effectiveness of L2 is affected by both external factors including communicative environment, comprehensive input, and internal factors such as age, gender, aptitude, emotion, or learning motivation.

Question 2: In what functionalities are the use of Vietnamese in ELT classrooms proved to be effective/useful?

Language functionality

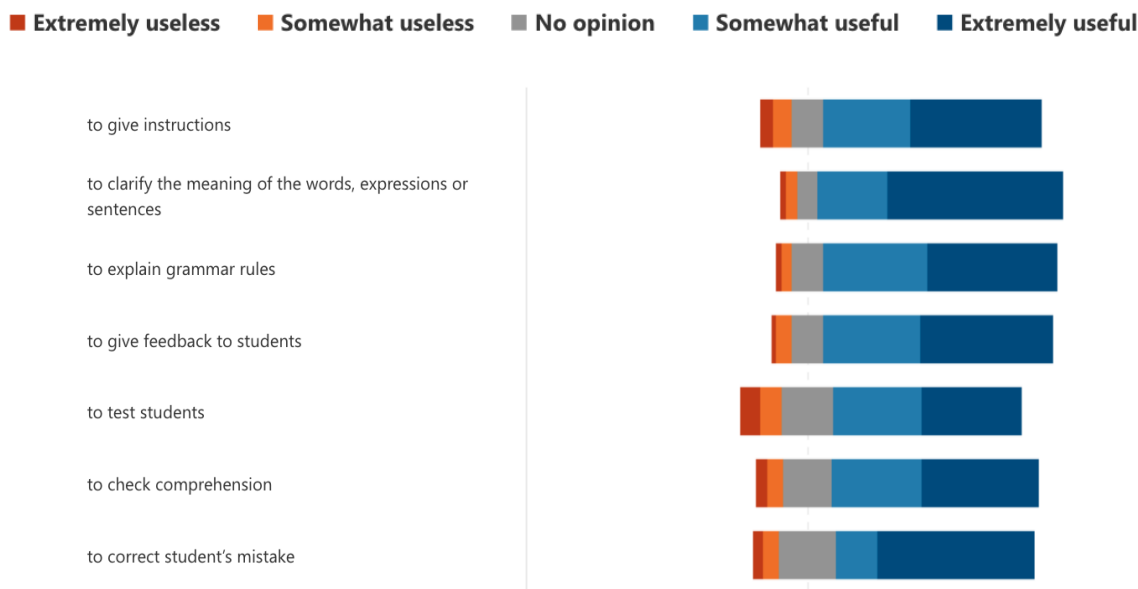


Chart 2. Language functionality

In comparison with other functions (managerial functionality, effective functionality, social functionality), language functionality is preferred the most with a large number of students

believing that the use of Vietnamese for language functionality is somewhat useful or extremely useful. Teachers utilize L1 to facilitate the language teaching and learning process. Among these language functions, it can be seen from the chart that clarifying the meaning of the words, expressions, or sentences, explaining grammar rules, and giving feedback to students are most highly appreciated by VNU-IS students. Using L1 to test students or to check comprehension; however, was not really of much use to these students. It was easy to understand because once teachers provided enough instructions, students could finish the task or the test without any trouble.

Different studies have indicated that teachers typically employ L1 to introduce or explain new words/phrases (Ching-Wen et al., 2014). Because teaching grammar is so complicated, students would have difficulty understanding the lesson without the clarification in L1, especially those at lower levels. Therefore, explanations in L1 are required in these circumstances to help students distinguish between L1 and L2. However, in another research carried out by Tian and Jiang (2021), teachers' use of L1 is mainly for vocabulary tasks, not for grammatical ones. It was explained in his study that the reasons come from students' high level of language ability, who expect to focus more on meaning than structure in the oral interactions.

Managerial functionality



Chart 3. Managerial functionality

The managerial functionality is the second feature that L1 users support. Teachers typically utilize L1 for disciplinary concerns and participation issues in the classroom, among which are to carry out pair and group work, do classroom management, draw students' attention, to inform students about important tasks or deadlines. It is most important for students to be informed about important parts or deadlines, so they highly appreciated the use of Vietnamese in this situation more than others.

Affective functionality



Chart 4. Affective functionality

The third type of application is for the goal of inspiring students and improving relationships. It is understandable that with the support of the mother tongue, teachers can go step by step closer to their students, encourage them to raise their voices, tell their stories and make them feel more connected in their class. Language can be not only a bridge to connect different students from different backgrounds but also a barrier to stop them from entering the world of knowledge if the teachers do not know how to use it wisely and flexibly. Students welcome their teacher’s use of Vietnamese to create a more student-friendly learning environment in EFL classrooms.

The language barrier is a shared concern among EFL students. They are not sure if the teacher can understand what they say or if they can understand what is being said, so the use of a little Vietnamese will surely ease their anxiety and misunderstanding between teachers and students. Polio and Duff (1994) considered the mother tongue as a crucial component of learner assistance if used correctly. The motivations for using a bilingual method might be divided into three categories: maintaining a pleasant classroom environment, promoting student comprehension, and making effective use of class time.

Social functionality



Chart 5. Social functionality

Finally, the participants' preference for utilizing L1 for social functions is at the bottom of the list. These are informal dialogues that take place outside of the classroom and are not intended to be one of the learning objectives. VNU-IS students welcome lecturers talking about off-classroom topics, especially the big headlines in the media and the hot topics at university. However, they seem to hold the point that greeting students in Vietnamese is not really useful.

It is mostly agreed by surveyed students in VNU-IS that they feel more worried in the lessons with the native speaker teacher than with the Vietnamese teacher, especially students at lower levels because the language barrier prevents them from having small talks in English and conveying their messages.

Question 3: How much can students benefit from lecturers using Vietnamese in the listening, speaking, reading and writing lessons?

Students benefit from lecturers using L1

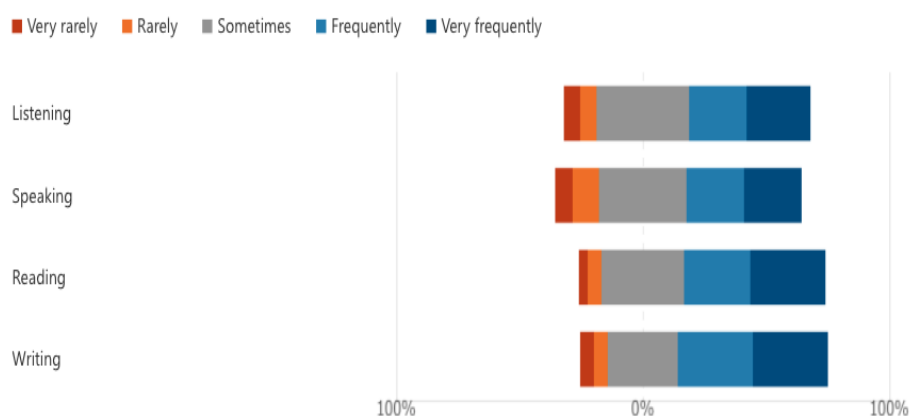


Chart 6. Students benefit from lecturers using L1

Chart 6 demonstrates the extent to which participants think students can benefit by using Vietnamese in each macro-skill. VNU-IS students thought that using Vietnamese provided no more than a 40% benefit for speaking and listening whereas, for reading and writing skills, they considered Vietnamese even more beneficial with 60% believing that Vietnamese should be used frequently/very frequently during class time. 53.5% of students being asked agreed that during the speaking lesson, the mother tongue should be used at the lowest frequency: very rarely, rarely, and sometimes. English language should be exposed as much as possible. 50.9% of students thought they didn't benefit much from lecturers using Vietnamese in listening lessons. Listening is the ability to accurately receive and interpret messages in the communication process, which is why the more English that students are exposed to, the better their listening skill is. Besides, VNU-IS students became more relaxed when it came to reading skill and writing skills. In general, participants seemed to agree that there is at least a 10-40% benefit from using L1 in all macro-skills, with a higher benefit for writing and reading.

Discussion

The results of this study shared many things in common with the previous studies. It can be seen that the attitudes of students in VNU-IS classes are the same as the views recorded by English language teachers in the study conducted by Kohi and Suvarna Lakshmi (2020). Kohi and Suvarna Lakshmi (2020) concluded that English language teachers hold a positive attitude towards different functionalities of L1, especially in teaching language and classroom management. It's agreed that a student's language proficiency is an important factor that decides

the effectiveness of L1 usage. Intermediate students in this study approve of their mother tongue use when necessary. Similarly, in another research done by Almohaimed & Almurshed (2018), it is revealed that advanced learners hold a negative attitude towards the use of L1 in their English classes, whereas elementary and intermediate learners generally perceive the judicious use of their L1 positively.

Although the mother tongue is favored by almost all surveyed participants, the use of Vietnamese in EFL lessons should be limited. In an English lesson, the native language should only be utilized when there are no other options. When it appears that certain students are having difficulty absorbing the desired input, Vietnamese may be a good option. However, it should only be used as a tool to help students overcome language hurdles, as English still remains dominant in the classroom. In pair and group work, Vietnamese can also be used to eliminate interruptions from participants. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) permits students to utilize their L1 in an L2 class so that they may speak confidently and clearly in conversations (Gibson & Chandler, 1988). According to Taşçı and Aksu (2020), an amount of 21-30% of classroom instructions in L1 is reasonable for Turkish EFL teachers.

In order to do so, teachers should take full advantage of their language proficiency as well as their pedagogical skills. A well-prepared lesson plan will result in a good performance in class and reaching learning objectives. A new word can be successfully presented with the support of flashcards, realia, and other visual aids. A grammatical phenomenon can be explained with the help of video clips, stories, and examples. If the teacher has to explain anything abstract or complicated, he or she should first try saying and reciting it in English before proceeding to Vietnamese.

When it is necessary for the Vietnamese language to play its role, it is advisable to use explanations instead of direct translations to minimize any bias caused by the various meanings of vocabulary in Vietnamese.

Findings by Mayni (2021) revealed that students show a positive attitude toward the use of L1 in L2 classrooms because they believe that their mother tongue can help them with understanding difficult concepts. However, EFL teachers at the English Language Department at Tehran Institute of Technology approve of an English-only policy to provide students with more exposure to the target language.

Conclusion

From the above findings, it is concluded that the Vietnamese language can become an effective tool in an EFL classroom once it is not overused by both teachers and students. Almost all student participants welcome the use of L1 in L2 classrooms.

Vietnamese high school students are not much exposed to the target language, and the traditional grammar-translation method is still commonly applied in most schools, with the aim of knowledge, not communication. Therefore, it becomes one of the main difficulties for them

when they have to move from Vietnamese speaking to an English only environment at universities including VNU-IS.

The outcome of the present study presents that the use of L1 in an EFL classroom can be beneficial to both VNU-IS teachers and students for the following purposes: language functionality, managerial functionality, effective functionality, and social functionality, among which language functionality is most favored by VNU-IS students (e.g. explaining new words, especially terminologies and abstract words).

Teachers use learners' L1 for a variety of reasons in the classroom. These reasons may be well clarified for certain instructors, while for others, the necessity may develop in specific teaching circumstances. Learners' views of the reasons for instructors' use of L1 in an L2 classroom may differ from their comprehension of the reasons. According to Auerbach (1993), the teacher and students should come to an agreement on whether or not L1 should have a place in L2 classrooms.

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Biodata

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