

STRATEGIC USE OF THE FIRST LANGUAGE (L1) IN EFL CLASSROOMS: STUDENTS' AND TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES FROM A PAKISTANI TERTIARY CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

The present study explores students' and teachers' views on the use of the first language (L1) in English language classrooms. It was carried out at Kohat University of Science & Technology (KUST), Kohat, where both students and teachers share the same L1, namely Pashto. The study employed questionnaires and interviews to collect data from 30 students and seven teachers. The results show that most students and teachers believe that the use of the L1 can facilitate understanding, particularly in grammar and vocabulary. The findings further indicate that L1 use can make the classroom environment more comfortable and help reduce learners' stress and anxiety. However, both groups also reported that excessive use of the L1 can be harmful, as it may limit students' opportunities to practise English. The study therefore suggests that teachers should use the L1 carefully, selectively, and only when pedagogically necessary. Maintaining a balance between English and the L1 is essential for promoting effective learning in EFL classrooms at the tertiary level.

Keywords: first language, strategic use of L1, English classroom, students' views, teachers' views, language learning

1. INTRODUCTION

English is one of the most commonly taught languages around the world. Many students learn English as a second or foreign language in academic institutions such as schools/college/university and language centers (Crystal, 2003). In these classrooms, students often share the same first language (L1), which is not English. For example, in countries like China, Brazil, or Turkey, students might all speak Mandarin, Portuguese, or Turkish as their L1 while learning English together (Cook, 2001). However, in the present study, the common language spoken by all the students and teachers as L1 is one of the regional languages of Pakistan known as Pashto.

In many English classes, teachers and the administrators of the academic institutes believe that English should be used as much as possible. This idea comes from the belief that the more you use English, the faster you learn it (Turnbull & Dailey-O'Cain, 2009). This is why some academic institutions including schools/colleges/universities and language centers and teachers try to create an English-only classroom. However, this can sometimes be stressful or confusing for students, especially beginners. There is a possibility that some of the students might not be able to understand what the teacher is talking about and furthermore they might become shy and frustrated when they are unable to express themselves. When students do not fully understand the teacher's instructions or explanations, they may experience anxiety, frustration, or reluctance to participate in classroom activities (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986).

Conversely, other teachers and researchers assume that the occasional use of the L1 of the student can be useful in the learning process. As an example, the use of L1 may serve to

explain any complicated grammar, new vocabulary or instructions in the classroom (Cook, 2001). It will also conserve time and make the students feel more comfortable. Because of this, many teachers use L1 in small amounts, depending on the situation and the level of their students. On the other hand, some teachers and researchers believe that using the student's L1 from time to time can actually help the learning process. For example, using L1 can help explain difficult grammar points, new vocabulary, or classroom instructions more efficiently (Cook, 2001; Nation, 2003). It can also save time and help students feel more comfortable. Because of this, many teachers use L1 in small amounts, depending on the situation and learners' proficiency levels (Macaro, 2005).

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Even though many teachers use L1 in English classrooms, there is still disagreement about whether this is a good or bad practice. Some believe it helps students learn better, while others worry it will reduce their exposure to English. Additionally, in the classroom teachers and students may not always agree on how much L1 should be used or when it should be used. First of all, the researchers need to understand their opinions/ideas better so that English teaching can be more effective, purposive and supportive for learners. (Turnbull & Dailey-O'Cain, 2009). Moreover, teachers and students may not always share similar views about how much L1 should be used or in which situations it is appropriate. Therefore, it is necessary to understand their opinions and experiences more clearly so that English language teaching can become more effective, purposeful, and supportive for learners in EFL contexts.

1.2 Research Questions

The current article tries to answer the below questions:

1. What are student's and teacher's opinions about the use of L1 in the English classroom?
2. Why, when and where they use L1?
3. What are the problems or disadvantages students and teachers face while using L1 in class?

1.3 Research Objectives

This article presents the following objectives:

1. To get student's and teacher's opinions and perceptions about using the first language in the English classroom.
2. To know that in which situations do they use L1.
3. To know the fact that why do they use L1 in some specific situations and tend to avoid it on other occasion.
4. To find out whether or not students and teachers see any problems or disadvantages with using L1 in classroom.

1.4 Significance of the Study

The ongoing study aims to understand the opinions and ideas of the teachers and students that how both students and teachers feel about using the first language (L1) in English classrooms. The study analyze their opinions, how much and when they use L1, why they use it, and in which situations they find it helpful or not helpful.

This study is important for several reasons. First, it helps teachers understand when and how to use L1 in a way that supports student's learning. Second, it can help teachers and the administrators of the academic institutes make better decisions about classroom policies. Third, it gives a voice to students and teachers by showing their real opinions and experiences. Finally, the study may help future researchers who are also interested in language teaching methods.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section looks at past research studies and ideas gathered through personal *observations* and self-experiences related to using the first language (L1) in English classrooms. It explains

what other researchers and teachers/students have said about this topic. It also shows how this study fits with what others have found. The main areas discussed in this section are: the role of L1 in language learning, reasons for using the L1 in class, views of students and teachers, and the possible problems of using L1 too much.

2.1 The Role of L1 in Language Learning

The first language, or L1, is the language a person learns from birth. In many English classrooms, especially in countries where English is neither the first language (L1), nor second language (L2); instead its status, role and functions are that of a foreign language, both students and teachers share the same L1. Some researchers believe that the L1 can help students learn a second language (L2) or a foreign language such as English (Cook, 2001). It can support learning by helping students understand difficult ideas, especially in grammar and vocabulary. Others suggest that the L1 can make students feel more relaxed and confident. This is important because students who feel comfortable in class may be more willing to take part and try speaking English (Nation, 2003). Other studies highlight the affective role of the L1, suggesting that it can help learners feel more relaxed and confident in the classroom. This emotional comfort is important, as students who feel less anxious may be more willing to participate and attempt to use English in class (Horwitz et al., 1986; Nation, 2003).

2.2 Reasons for Using the L1 in the English Classroom

Teachers may use the L1 in English classrooms for a variety of pedagogical and practical reasons. One common reason is to explain grammar rules, as certain grammatical concepts may be easier to understand when explained in L1 (Cook, 2001). Another reason is giving classroom instructions, as the use of L1 can save time and reduce confusion, particularly with lower-level learners when giving classroom instructions. Checking comprehension is also one of the possible reasons since teachers can check the comprehension with the help of L1. Furthermore, the development of relationships is another major reason as the use of L1 may assist in the development of friendly and caring atmosphere in the classroom (Macaro, 2005). Another significant aspect of L1 is the fact that students and learners can also speak L1 with their peers, seek some help, or struggle to grasp something complicated.

2.3 Students' Views on Using L1

Students also believe that they can learn better using L1, particularly when they are lower in the level of English. They become more confident when they will be able to pose questions or check answers in their own language (Tang, 2002). According to some students, the L1 enables them to feel less intimidated when speaking in class. Not all students feel like that though, as some of them feel that excessive L1 may slow down the acquisition of English. They desire additional opportunities to listen and speak English, although it may be difficult at the beginning (Horwitz et al., 1986).

2.4 Teacher's Views on Using L1

The views of teacher may vary depending on the training, experience and beliefs of a teacher. Other teachers are of the opinion that use of the L1 will be of help, particularly when it comes to beginners or when time is limited. They believe that it is the way things can be explained in a fast and clear way. They argue that L1 use helps explain concepts more clearly and efficiently, leading to better understanding among students (Cook, 2001). Some believe that English must be utilized as much as it is possible in the classroom. The worry of these teachers is that in case students listen to too much L1, they will not practice enough English. Other teachers attempt to strike a balance by relying on the L1 during the point of absolute necessity (Turnbull and Dailey-O Cain, 2009).

2.5 Challenges of Using L1

The L1 can be useful in numerous aspects, but still, there are certain obstacles such as excessive use of L1, over-dependency on L1 and unequal learning etc. First and foremost, in case teachers or students use the L1 excessively, they might not practice enough English (Turnbull & Dailey-O'Cain, 2009). In the same view, the students may become dependent on the L1 and fail to work independently to learn English. Not only this, in multilingual classrooms, a language can be used to exclude the rest of the students (Macaro, 2005). These issues demonstrate the fact that it is necessary to apply the L1 in a smart and limited manner. In short, numerous studies demonstrate that L1 can be useful in English classrooms, provided that they would be used quite carefully. Different opinions are represented by both students and teachers, and the correct way of using the L1 is not unique. The point is to make use of it when it assists learning but not excessively that it robs one of practicing the English language.

2.6 Empirical studies

Recent research in applied linguistics and discourse analysis in Pakistan has addressed a variety of subjects, including syntactic theory, sociolinguistic perspectives, and the influence of language on education. For example, Ali et al. (2020) explored how Pakistani students perceive standard British and American English, uncovering complex identity and sociolinguistic challenges that are often intensified by gender, as male and female students may experience different expectations and opportunities in academic settings.

Arshad et al. (2024) compared ad-positional phrase structures in English and Urdu using X-Bar Theory and the Theta Criterion, revealing both similarities and differences between the two languages. The emotional side of language learning has also been studied; Adeel and Ishtiaq (2025) investigated language anxiety among undergraduate English learners, finding that anxiety and attitudes toward English differ by gender and can affect academic achievement.

Ismael and Ishtiaq (2025) examined students' opinions on code-switching in higher education, highlighting both the positive aspects and the difficulties of bilingual practices in classrooms. Collectively, these studies illustrate the flexible and evolving nature of language use in educational contexts, where gender can influence how students use language and participate in class.

The connection between language, literature, and philosophy is shown in Gill et al. (2024), who analyzed themes of love and spirituality in Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* through Sufi philosophy, demonstrating how literature can address deep semantic and philosophical questions. Majid and Ishtiaq (2019) used stylistic analysis to uncover the syntactic and thematic complexity of E.E. Cummings' poetry, while Majid et al. (2020) evaluated how English textbooks at the primary level present and teach grammar. These studies also provide insight into how male and female students may engage differently with literature and grammar instruction.

Critical discourse analysis has been a major focus in recent research. Gill, Ishtiaq, and Khan (2025) studied how Reham Khan is depicted in digital media from a feminist perspective using the transitivity framework, while Gill et al. (2025) conducted a corpus-based genre analysis of the inaugural speeches of Donald Trump and Joe Biden, revealing rhetorical and structural features of political language. These works highlight the importance of considering gender when analyzing language use and representation.

Raza et al. (2025) contributed to syntactic theory by comparing the null-subject parameter in English and Pashto. However, their research lacks detailed information about methodology and does not thoroughly discuss educational implications; more clarity about sample

selection and data collection would strengthen the study. Still, it provides a solid foundation for future comparative syntactic research.

Ismael et al. (2025) effectively explored student attitudes toward code-switching in higher education, focusing on its practical implications for teaching and offering useful recommendations for educators. However, the study only includes student perspectives, missing the viewpoints of teachers and administrators; involving more stakeholders would make the findings more comprehensive.

Ullah et al. (2025) investigated gender differences in English language achievement, providing valuable comparative data for educational policy. However, their binary approach does not account for non-binary identities or deeper sociocultural factors. A more nuanced analysis would improve the research, but the study still points to an important area for further investigation.

Luqman et al. (2025) studied the use of computer-assisted learning in English language education, reflecting the increasing role of technology in classrooms. While their case study offers practical insights, its focus on a single institution limits its generalizability. Broader or mixed-methods research could provide a more comprehensive perspective, but the study remains relevant for similar educational settings considering technology integration.

Gill et al. (2025) conducted a critical discourse analysis of Reham Khan's portrayal in digital media from a feminist angle, using the transitivity framework. The study's strength lies in its combination of feminist theory and linguistic analysis, offering detailed insights into gendered media representation. However, it could be improved by including a wider range of digital sources and discussing broader societal implications. Overall, it makes a significant contribution to feminist discourse analysis in the digital age.

On the theoretical side, Ishtiaq and Gill (2024) applied Chomsky's X-Bar Theory to Pakistani languages, comparing Urdu, Pashto, and English, and deepening the understanding of both universal and language-specific grammar rules. Similarly, Ishtiaq et al. (2022c) examined parallel syntactic patterns in English, advocating for a unified approach to internal linguistic systems. Ishtiaq et al. (2022b) addressed the challenges of teaching and pronouncing transliterated words, identifying English-to-Urdu transliteration as a major source of pronunciation errors for Urdu speakers and emphasizing the need for targeted teaching strategies. Additionally, Ishtiaq et al. (2021a) compared the semantic density of religious texts, showing how syntactic and lexical choices affect meaning in translation and highlighting the importance of syntax in cross-linguistic and cross-cultural communication.

The present research paper examines the perspectives of the students and teachers in a practical classroom environment at Kohat University of Science & Technology (KUST), Kohat. It assists in understanding the circumstances of usage of the L1, the reasons, and the perceptions of people about it.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The following section describes the way this work was done. It includes research design, participants, data collection areas, methods, and data collection methods as well as its analysis. It also discusses the instruments employed in the research and measures that were adopted to ensure that the study was decent and appropriate to the participants.

3.1 Research Design

This research was mixed-method based. This implies that it employed quantitative (numbers and statistics) and qualitative (opinions and feelings) approaches. General information has been gathered using questionnaires, when it came to many students and teachers. Then, interviews were conducted to get to know better about their thoughts (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The reason to select this approach was that it will assist in providing a

comprehensive picture regarding the opinions of students and teachers regarding the use of L1 in English classes (Dörnyei, 2007).

3.2 Participants

The study included 30 students and five English teachers from undergraduate level of a university i.e. at Kohat University of Science & Technology (KUST), Kohat. All of them use the same first language (L1), and they are learning or teaching English as a foreign language. The students were selected from BS-level English classes from the Department of English. The teachers had different levels of experience, from a few years to over ten years. The selection of participants was based on convenience and accessibility, which is commonly used in small-scale educational research (Dörnyei, 2007).

3.3 Research Site

The study was carried out at Kohat University of Science & Technology (KUST), Kohat, where English is taught as a subject both at postgraduate and undergraduate levels. Both students and teachers in the study speak Pashto as their first language (L1) and Urdu as their second language (L2). English is used mainly in the classroom and not much in daily life outside school and functions as a foreign language.

3.4 Data Collection Tools

Two main tools were used to collect the data:

3.4.1 Questionnaire

A simple questionnaire was given to both students and teachers. It had two parts: Multiple-choice and Likert-scale questions: These helped find out how often and why the L1 is used in class (Creswell, 2014). Open-ended questions: These gave participants a chance to share their personal thoughts and experiences.

3.4.2 Interviews

After the questionnaires, short interviews were done with a few students and teachers. The interviews asked more detailed questions about their feelings and experiences with using the L1. This helped explain the answers from the questionnaires more clearly (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

3.5 Data Collection Procedure

First of all, permission was asked by the researcher from the college administration and the teachers. After that, the questionnaires were distributed with students and teachers during class time. Researcher claimed that their answers would be kept private and used only for research and will be destroyed all at once when the research is completed. After collecting the questionnaires, some students and teachers were invited for short interviews, which were recorded with their permissions (Creswell, 2014).

3.6 Data Analysis

When the questionnaires were collected. Its results were counted and organized in the basic statistical data like percentages and averages. These results showed and helped how often the L1 was used and what were the reasons behind its use. The answers taken from the interviews were read carefully and grouped into common ideas known as themes. These ideas helped to understand what people felt using and believed about using the L1 (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The above section explains the procedure and purpose of the study that how the study was done, along with the methods, tools used, and people involved. By using both questionnaires and interviews, the study collected a mix of numbers and personal stories and ideas. This section helps give a better understanding of how students and teachers view the use of the L1 in English classrooms.

3. DATA ANALYSIS, RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the data analysis and shows the main results of the study as well as explains what they mean. The findings from the questionnaires and interviews are shared in

an easy-to-understand way. The results are also discussed in relation to past research and the questions asked in this study.

4.1 Student's Views on Using L1

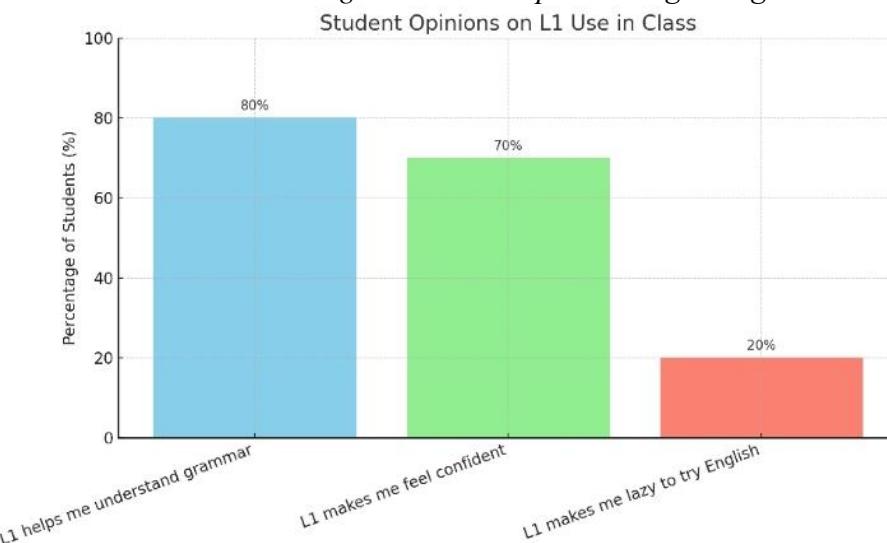
4.1.1 Questionnaire Results

Most students said they think using the L1 in English class is helpful. About 80% of students agreed that it helps them understand difficult words and grammar rules. Around 70% said it makes them feel more confident in class. Many students said they prefer when teachers explain hard ideas in the L1 first and then repeat them in English. However, a smaller number (about 20%) said that too much L1 use makes them lazy to try using English.

Table 4.1 Students' Responses Regarding L1 Use

Statement	Agree (%)
L1 helps me understand grammar	89%
L1 makes me feel confident	70%
L1 makes me lazy to try English	20%

Graph 4.1 Bar Chart Data concerning Students' Responses Regarding L1 Use



4.1.2 Interview Results

Students in the interviews said that the L1 is used to ease the fear and confusion, particularly when learning grammar. A student reported that, there are times when I am lost when the teacher is explaining everything in English. But when they speak our language, I can comprehend them better.

One more student explained that he wants to speak English more, but when he does not understand, he has to use his own language to assist him.

4.2 Teacher's Views on Using L1

4.2.1 Questionnaire Results

The majority of the teachers (4 out of 5) indicated that they occasionally use the L1 in the classroom particularly in the following instances:

Explaining grammar rules

Issuing challenging orders.

Ensure that students know

Assessment of student comprehension.

One of the teachers indicated that they do not overuse the L1, but when they notice that the students seem confused, they use it.

Table 4.2 Reasons for L1 Use

Reason for L1use	Numbers of Teachers
Explain grammar	04
Give instructions	03
Check understanding	04
Avoid confusion	01

4.2.2 Interview Results

The teachers in the interviews stated that they are sparse with the L1. One of the teachers told, that he does not want students rely on it, but it even saves time and some misunderstanding can be avoided.

Another teacher mentioned, *“With beginner students, it’s hard not to use the L1. But I always try to go back to English as soon as I can.”* He added that with first year pupils, the L1 cannot be avoided. But I never fail to revert as soon as I can to English.

4.2.3 Occurrence and Cases of L1-Use.

Both students and teachers reported that the L1 is more frequently used in the lower levels of English. It is usually used for:

Explaining grammar and vocabulary

Giving instructions for tasks

Helping students when they are stuck

Creating a friendly and safe classroom feeling

As students improve, the amount of L1 use seems to go down.

4.3 Challenges Noted by Teachers and Students

There are students who claimed to be lazy at times and wait to be explained by the teacher in L1 rather than attempting to learn English. Some of the teachers also fear that the students are too attached to the L1 and are less ready to speak English. This justifies what Nation (2003) remarked regarding the danger of excessive use of L1. Adding to it in small doses is helpful, whereas excessive amounts slow down learning a language.

In summary, the results indicate that students and teachers mainly regard the L1 as useful in English classrooms. They concur that it must be applied when there is the need, but sparingly. It aids comprehension, cultivates confidence and aids learning, particularly in the lower levels. There is however a danger that when not used with care it can lead to students' over-reliance on it.

4. Discussion

These findings indicate that a number of students regard the L1 as an effective aid resource. They do not wish that it should substitute English but that it assists them in need. This substantiates previous studies concerning the topic, as the study by Tang (2002) revealed that students are able to be more relaxed and assured when allowed to speak their native language in the classroom.

The teachers participating in this research largely concurred with Cook (2001) who opined that learning could be facilitated through the L1 provided it is used responsibly. They do not think that the L1 ought to substitute English. These findings indicate that a lot of teachers are attempting to strike a compromise.

This research supports the results of previous studies that encourage the use of the L1 as a scaffolding tool. The reaction of students confirms Tang (2002) who underlined emotional comfort that the L1 gives, whereas teacher practice evidences the claim by Cook (2001) that the restricted use of L1 may also be educationally advantageous. The lesson learned is the subtle application: L1 is not good or bad, it is situational. The fact that student express both reliance and aspiration to move beyond the L1 suggests that it serves as a temporary

cognitive and affective support mechanism. Teacher's selective use reflects an understanding of this balance, though not all have explicit strategies in place.

The findings of this study reinforce earlier research that supports the strategic use of the L1 as a scaffolding tool. Student responses validate Tang (2002), who emphasized the emotional comfort the L1 provides, while teacher practices align with Cook's (2001) assertion that limited L1 use can be educationally beneficial. A key insight is the nuanced use: L1 is not simply helpful or harmful, it is context-dependent. The fact that student express both reliance and aspiration to move beyond the L1 suggests that it serves as a temporary cognitive and affective support mechanism. Teacher's selective use reflects an understanding of this balance, though not all have explicit strategies in place.

Teachers' selective use of the L1 also indicates an implicit awareness of these risks. Although not all teachers reported having explicit strategies for managing L1 use, their cautious approach suggests an attempt to balance efficiency with pedagogical goals. The tendency to reduce L1 use as students' proficiency increases further supports the view that L1 use in this context is adaptive rather than habitual. This gradual shift from L1 to English aligns with scaffolding principles, where support is reduced as learners become more capable.

Overall, the discussion highlights that the strategic use of the L1 in Pakistani tertiary-level EFL classrooms can serve important cognitive, emotional, and instructional functions. At the same time, both students and teachers recognize the need for restraint to prevent dependency. These findings underscore the importance of developing clear, context-sensitive guidelines for L1 use that respect learners' needs while maintaining sufficient exposure to English.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The whole previous study was about what students and teachers think and conclude about using the first language (L1) in English classrooms. It is concluded from the study that most of the people prefer the L1 and found it helpful, especially when they want to learning new things or difficult topics. They, both, are satisfied by using L1 in the English classrooms. Both students and teachers stated that using L1 makes the classroom feel more comfortable and becomes helpful with understanding grammar and vocabulary.

Students shared that using the L1 in the classroom gives them confidence and helps them in asking questions without fear/anxiety. The reason behind the teacher's use of L1 is, they use it to save time and to avoid confusion, and to make them understand well especially with beginner-level learners. They think that it is a good way to make them good in vocabulary as beginners usually compare L1 and L2. They make sentences in L1 and then change it into L2. However, both groups also added that over use of the L1 can be a problematic for them. It may lead students less active in using English.

The given results show that using the L1 in some places support English learning, but it should not replace English. Teachers should be aware of when and why they use the L1 and soon return to English (L2) as much as possible.

For sure, the use of L1 in English classrooms is a very complex topic. Both have benefits and challenges. When it is used in the right way and in a right time, the L1 can support learning and make students feel safe and supported. The fundamental is the balance between them: using the L1 as a helpful tool for learning, not as a replacement for learning English.

6.1 Recommendations

These results are purely based on the previous study and the following suggestions are made for teachers and students respectively:

Use the L1 where students clearly do not understand the meaning, but return to English afterward and explain that topic in English too. From this they will get the original meaning and also will know about the English of the particular words used.

Avoid overuse of L1 in the L2 class. Try to make students encourage so that students can speak and think in English.

Use the L1 only there where teachers building trust and explaining hard concepts when they find difficult to understand, especially with lower-level students.

Talk with students and ask them about when and where it is okay to use the L1 and why. This will help to find a good reason their problems with L2.

Use the L1 only when needed. Try to make questions and answer sessions in English when possible.

Work on building confidence by practicing speaking and listening in English, even if it's hard.

Give them courage, and don't be afraid to make mistakes. Learning a language takes time and practice like a baby.

6.2 Suggestions for Future Research

Studies could look at the changes in L1 over time as students move to higher levels.

Research could be possibly done in schools where students have different first languages to see how teachers manage L1 use in those classrooms.

It may also be helpful to study how teacher training programs talk about L1 use and what advice they give to new teachers.

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