

**NHẬN THỨC CỦA SINH VIÊN VỀ VIỆC SỬ DỤNG  
NGÔN NGỮ THỨ NHẤT TRONG LỚP HỌC TIẾNG ANH:  
NGHIÊN CỨU TẠI TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC TRÀ VINH**

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*Việc sử dụng phương pháp đơn ngữ hay song ngữ trong quá trình dạy và học tiếng Anh là một chủ đề gây tranh cãi trong nhiều năm. Nghiên cứu này chủ yếu sử dụng phương pháp định lượng để điều tra nhận thức của sinh viên về việc sử dụng ngôn ngữ thứ nhất trong lớp học tiếng Anh. Phiếu khảo sát được sử dụng để thu thập số liệu từ 50 sinh viên và xác định những lý do chính khiến sinh viên sử dụng ngôn ngữ thứ nhất cũng như nhận thức của họ về việc giảng viên sử dụng ngôn ngữ thứ nhất trong lớp học tiếng Anh. Kết quả cho thấy sinh viên sử dụng tiếng mẹ đẻ chủ yếu để nắm vững những kiến thức phức tạp và diễn đạt chính xác vấn đề của mình khi cần sự giúp đỡ từ giảng viên. Ngoài ra, sinh viên cũng đánh giá tích cực việc giảng viên sử dụng ngôn ngữ thứ nhất một cách hợp lý, đặc biệt là ở giai đoạn đầu khóa học.*

**Từ khóa:** ngôn ngữ thứ nhất, người học, nhận thức, lớp học tiếng Anh, dạy và học tiếng Anh

*The issue of whether to use the monolingual or bilingual approaches in EFL teaching and learning has been the subject debated for years. This quantitative study aims to investigate the English majors' perceptions towards the use of L1 in the EFL classrooms. A questionnaire was administered to 50 students in order to identify their reasons for using L1 and their perceptions towards their teachers' use of L1 in the English classroom. The findings reveal that the students resorted to their mother tongue mostly for dealing with complex knowledge and accurately expressing their problems in the situations where they thought they needed help from the teacher. Besides, the participants appreciated their teachers' rational use of L1, especially at the initial stage of the course.*

**Keywords:** EFL learners, perceptions, L1 use, EFL classroom, English teaching.

**STUDENTS' PERCEPTION TOWARDS THE USE OF L1  
IN THE EFL CLASSROOMS: A CASE AT TRA VINH UNIVERSITY**

**1. Introduction**

Throughout the history of EFL education, there has been a debate on whether or not the learners' first language

(L1) should be used in the EFL classrooms. According to one perspective, the effective use of L1 takes an important role in the process of teaching and learning English, while the other view considers L1 as a hindrance that limits the learners' exposure to English and, consequently, should be excluded. One of

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the most popular theories of L2 acquisition is established by Krashen (1981) who stated that the optimum exposure to the target language is essential for successful L2 acquisition. While this theory has been highly compelling and influential to many researchers, there are some findings to the contrary showing that L1 is a valuable, beneficial learning aid that can significantly support L2 learning (Cook, 2001; Iswati & Hadimulyono, 2018). This contradiction leads to the fact that the EFL teachers may feel confused to decide the appropriate behavior towards the use of mother tongue in their classrooms and have to struggle with the challenging questions: Should they allow students, or even themselves, to use their mother tongue? How much L1 is reasonable? In fact, it seems to be impossible to thoroughly answer those questions without considering the students' perceptions – one of the two main objects in the teaching and learning process. Investigating the matter from the learners' perspective would also allow us to achieve a comprehensive view of this controversial issue. In addition, much of the research up to now has tended to focus on the EFL learners' attitude towards the teacher's use of L1 rather than comprehensively investigate the students' perceptions towards not only their teacher's use of L1 but also their own reliance on L1. This paper therefore aimed to find out the Vietnamese EFL learners' reasons for using L1 and their perceptions

toward the teachers' use of L1 in their EFL classrooms.

For this purpose, the following questions were constructed:

1. What reasons do the Vietnamese EFL students have for using L1 in the EFL classroom?
2. What are Vietnamese EFL students' perceptions towards their teachers' use of L1 in the EFL classroom?

## **2. Literature review**

### ***2.1. Definition of perception and the importance of students' perception in EFL education***

According to the Oxford Learner's dictionary (2019), perception can be defined as 'the ability to understand the true nature of something, and an idea, a belief or an image you have as a result of how you see or understand something'. Another definition of perception comes from Huffman and Vernoy (1997) who stated that perception is the process of selecting, organizing and interpreting sensory data which enables people to form their concept of the world and thereby affects their behavior. Perception can also be described as "the process whereby the external tokens of objects and phenomena are reflected in man's consciousness" (Leontiev, 1981, p.31). In this study, perception can be generally interpreted as how the EFL learners perceive and evaluate the use of L1 in their English classroom.

The importance of perception results from its influence on the individuals' decision-making as well as action-taking and when it comes to English learning, there seems to be no exception. In the process of L2 acquisition, the students gain knowledge mostly by experiencing and reflecting on the teacher's instructional activities and language use. Therefore, the way the EFL learners perceive their teacher's language use in the classroom may significantly affect their learning motivation, learning style and achievement. In conclusion, understanding students' perceptions is essential in EFL education because it equips the teachers with a valuable basis to determine the most appropriate and effective teaching methods.

## ***2.2. Arguments for and against the use of L1 in the EFL classrooms***

Due to the prominence of the language teaching approaches that emphasize the significance of immersing the language learners in the L2 and maximizing their exposure to the target language, there have been objections to the use of mother tongue in the EFL classroom. Many researchers stated that the first language has no role to play in the EFL classrooms, or can even be a hindrance when the learners tend to make negative transfer from their native language to the target one (Littlewood & Yu, 2011). Similarly, Lightbown and Spada (1999) considered the learners' reliance on L1 as a typical source of errors and communicative incompetency in L2 learning process.

On the contrary, those who hold a positive view on the use of L1 have confirmed the facilitating role of L1 not only in L2 teaching and learning practice but also in enhancing students' learning motivation and improving teacher – student relationship. From the cognitive viewpoint, the researchers believe that the learners' experience of acquiring their mother tongue can naturally become a beneficial cognitive tool for L2 learning (Butzkamm, 1998; Cook, 2001). This view is in line with Storch and Wigglesworth (2003) who claim that “the use of L1 may provide learners with additional cognitive support that allows them to analyze language and work at a higher level than would be possible where they restricted to sole use of their L2” (p.760). Furthermore, the appropriate use of L1 is believed to be beneficial for facilitating the interpersonal interactions and enhancing the positive relationship between teacher and learners (Iswati & Hadimulyono, 2018).

## ***2.3. Related studies***

As there is growing support for the rational use of mother tongue in L2 learning, there are questions about when and what amount of the first language should be used in the EFL classroom. In order to clarify this issue, many researchers have investigated the teachers' and learners' perceptions and attitudes towards it. Iswati and Hadimulyono (2018), in their quantitative study investing the role of Bahasa Indonesia in the English classroom, have found that the

use of L1 was beneficial and received great support from 158 non-English major students who were chosen to be the participants of the study. Significantly, explaining difficult concepts of L2 appears to be the most essential role of L1, as stated by 87% of the participants. These results further support a previous study by Debreli and Oyman (2016) who conducted a quantitative study investigating the students' perceptions toward the use of L1 in their EFL classrooms. In this study, a questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data from 303 Turkish students with different language proficiency levels and educational backgrounds. The SPSS analysis of the data revealed that the students have a positive perception towards the use of L1, especially in defining new vocabulary and clarifying complex grammar points. Their findings also revealed the relationship between the learners' English proficiency and their attitude towards the L1 use, when the students with low English background were found to "experience more complexity in comprehending in L2, and that they require more assistance through L1" (p.158).

Another noteworthy finding comes from Mahmud (2018) who used a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire and a semi-structured interview to explore the Bangladeshi EFL teachers' and students' perceptions regarding the teachers' use of L1. The analysis of data collected from 10 teachers and 60 students led to the

conclusion that although the teachers and the students agreed that L1 should not be completely banned, they both take a cautious view of L1 use. Almost all the teachers believed that L1 use should be maintained at a minimal level to prevent students from relying on L1 all the time. The students themselves were also aware that excessive use of L1 would be harmful to their learning and even "complained that they do not appreciate it if teacher uses L1 for simple and easy matters" (p.32).

In consistency with the aforementioned studies, Shariati (2019) examined the occasions in which the students themselves need to use L1 and the students' attitudes towards the use of L1 and by delivering a questionnaire to fifty Iranian EFL students at different English levels. The study indicated that the most common reasons for students using L1 are asking new points in the lesson, facilitating communication with classmates, and explaining grammar points to their classmates. Moreover, there is a negative relationship between the learners' proficiency level and their attitude toward the use of L1. In other words, the higher the students' English proficiency, the more negative attitudes they have towards their teacher's use of L1.

While there is evidence supporting the students' positive perceptions towards L1 use in the EFL classroom, some distinctive findings also offer considerable references to the current study. In the

study of Resmini (2019) carried out in Indonesia, the students' perceptions towards the use of L1 was examined by collecting data from 40 EFL students through a questionnaire. The findings revealed that the participants had negative perceptions towards their teacher's use of mother tongue. Significantly, most of the participants were not comfortable with the use of L1 and preferred their teacher to use English in the classroom.

Regarding the use of L1 in Vietnamese EFL teaching context, Phuong and Dang (2021) conducted a study investigating the English – majored students' perceptions on the teachers' use of Vietnamese in the EFL classrooms. The researchers used questionnaire and interview as the instruments to collect data from 131 Vietnamese undergraduate students. In this mix method study, the findings shown that most of the Vietnamese EFL students preferred their teachers' use of L1 in the classrooms, especially in the specialized classes to help explain incomprehensible words, difficult concepts and reducing stress. However, some students who supported monolingual approach expressed concerns that overusing L1 could hinder their L2 learning process. The teachers then were expected to adjust the amount of L1 use based on the characteristic of each specific course and the students' level.

As it can be seen from the above-mentioned papers, there is a discrepancy among the previous studies' conclusions on students' perceptions towards the use

of L1 in the EFL classroom. More investigation therefore is needed to better determine this controversial issue. In addition, discovering the learners' perceptions towards their own use of L1 is also a significant aspect which deserves more attention, especially in the Vietnamese EFL teaching context where the English-only policy seems not to work well.

### 3. Research methodology

The current study employed a quantitative design by using a questionnaire consisting of 19 Likert scale items in order to collect broader information from different aspects of the research issues. The quantitative data were supported and elaborated by some qualitative data from the 2 follow-up open-ended questions.

- Participants of the study: Convenience sampling was used to select 50 participants for this study. All of the participants are the 1<sup>st</sup> year English major students at Tra Vinh university.

- Instruments: The questionnaire used in this study was adapted from Shariati's study (2019). Some items were removed and some additions were made to suit the context and the participants' background of the current study. The questionnaire covers different aspects consisting of the students' reasons for using L1 (9 items) and their perceptions towards their teacher's use of L1 in the EFL classroom (10 items). All of the items in these two parts were designed using a five-point

Likert scale that ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree (scored from 1 to 5). The questionnaire also includes 2 open-ended questions exploring the participants’ specific expectations about the appropriate use of L1.

- Procedures: First, the questionnaire was designed and piloted with a group of 10 EFL students to check its comprehensibility. Then, the questionnaire was adapted based on the students’ feedback and delivered to 50 participants using Google form tool. The quantitative data collected from the questionnaire were descriptively analysed

using SPSS 22. The qualitative information from the two open-ended questions was analysed via content analysis to gain more insight into how the students expect the L1 to be used by their teachers in the English classroom.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Findings

4.1.1. Students’ reasons for using L1 in the EFL classroom

The descriptive statistics of the items exploring students’ reason for using their mother tongue are indicated in table 1.

Table 1. Students’ reasons for using L1 in the EFL classroom

Students’ reasons for using L1	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
I often use Vietnamese in my English classrooms.	50	3.900	.95
I use Vietnamese to express the ideas that I cannot explain in English due to the lack of English vocabulary.	50	3.920	.94
I’m afraid of making mistake and being laughed at by my friends when speaking in English.	50	2.660	1.17
I use Vietnamese to ensure that my teacher and classmates understand my ideas correctly.	50	3.660	.98
I use Vietnamese when I need to ask for help from the teachers.	50	3.940	.77
I use Vietnamese to check the meaning of new words or the usage of complex grammar points.	50	4.080	.92
I can completely understand an English word only when I know its meaning in Vietnamese.	50	3.580	1.10
Using Vietnamese while studying helps me better recall the lesson content later.	50	3.460	1.07
Using Vietnamese makes me feel closer to my teachers.	50	3.460	.97
Valid N (listwise)	50		

As shown in table 1, most of the Vietnamese in their English classroom participants confirm that they do use (M=3.9, SD= 0.95). Specifically, the most

outstanding reason the students reported for using L1 in their classroom is to check the meaning of new words or the usage of complex grammar points (M= 4.08, SD= 0.92). The other two common reasons chosen by the students are to ask for help from the teachers (M= 3.94, SD= 0.77) and to express the ideas that they cannot explain in English (M= 3.92, SD= 0.94). On the other hand, it is interesting to note that the fear of making mistake and being laughed by their friends is the least important reason for students to use L1 (M= 2.66, SD= 1.17). Also, the students' responses for the other items are relatively positive, as reflected in the mean scores

above 3.0. The finding leads us to the assumption that the participants do not completely eliminate L1 in their English learning process. Instead, they take advantage of it for different purposes, mostly to facilitate communication and L2 learning.

4.1.2. Students' perception towards the teachers' use of L1 in the EFL classroom

The present study also aimed to investigate the students' perceptions toward their teachers' use of L1. The results from descriptive analysis were shown in table 2.

Table 2. Students' perceptions towards the teachers' use of L1 in the EFL classroom

Students' perceptions towards their teachers' use of L1	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
My teachers often use Vietnamese in the classroom.	50	2.600	.86
My teachers use Vietnamese to explain administrative information.	50	3.560	.99
My teachers use Vietnamese when most students do not understand in English.	50	3.720	.97
My teachers use Vietnamese to response to the students' answer.	50	3.080	.80
My teachers use Vietnamese to explain complex grammar points.	50	3.820	0.86
My teachers use Vietnamese to explain difficult, abstract vocabulary or ideas.	50	3.940	0.82
My teachers' use of Vietnamese helps me understand the lesson faster and better.	50	3.700	.89
My teachers use Vietnamese when they want to encourage the students.	50	3.480	.86
My teachers use Vietnamese to chat and make jokes with students.	50	3.520	.93
My teachers' use of Vietnamese helps me feel at ease, comfortable and less stressed.	50	3.800	.88
Valid N (listwise)	50		

The result shows that most of the participants do not think their teachers often use L1 in the EFL classroom ( $M=2.6$ ,  $SD=0.86$ ). However, the participants agree that the teachers' use of mother tongue make them feel at ease, comfortable and less stressed ( $M=3.80$ ,  $SD=0.88$ ). It is therefore possible to conclude that the students hold a positive attitude towards their teachers' use of L1.

Regarding the specific cases in which the teachers tend to use L1, there are two items that receive the highest scores. In other words, they are the main reasons why the teachers use L1 according to the participants' perspectives: to explain difficult, abstract vocabulary or ideas ( $M=3.94$ ,  $SD=0.82$ ) and to explain complex grammar points ( $M=3.82$ ,  $SD=0.86$ ). The data also indicate that giving responses and feedbacks to the students' answer is the least likely situation for the teachers to use L1, as observed by the participants ( $M=3.08$ ,  $SD=0.80$ ).

In addition, the qualitative data collected from the two open-ended questions revealed the students' specific expectation of when and how much L1 should be used by the English teachers. Many participants, as shown in their responses, think that Vietnamese is a helpful facilitator in L2 learning process. In most cases, the informants reported that

Participant 4: "In my opinion, teachers should use Vietnamese when the lesson has a difficult structure."

Participant 11: "I think sometimes, the English teacher should use in the classroom because it helps students understand the lesson better and reduce pressure when student study this subject."

Participant 38: "Teachers should speak more Vietnamese in order to create a comfortable learning environment."

Participants 44: "Teachers' use of Vietnamese helps me integrate into the classroom more easily and follow the lecture better."

However, significant differences have been found among the students' answers. Beside the participants who expect their teachers to use more Vietnamese, some others show their awareness of the negative effects of overusing L1 in the responses such as:

Participant 8: "I think English teacher should not use Vietnamese in the classroom too much."

Participant 21: "Often use of Vietnamese can make us understand the lesson easily at first, but later it will make students uninterested and reduce students' curiosity."

Participant 34: "Using Vietnamese a lot will not create a good environment for English learning because it may reduce listening and speaking skills of the students."

The findings from open-ended questions in the questionnaire also revealed that most participants expect

their English teachers to use L1 for 4 main purposes:

- to explain complex grammar points (40 responses)
- to clarify difficult, abstract vocabulary or ideas (29 responses)
- to give task instructions (26 responses)
- to explain administrative information. (22 responses)

#### **4.2. Discussion**

From the findings above, it can be concluded that the English only policy does not seem to be feasible in the current setting of Vietnamese EFL classrooms. Most participants find their mother tongue advantageous and rely on it to deal with several obstacles in their L2 learning process. In particular, L1 is usually used in the situations in which the students' English ability is not enough to express themselves or when they feel lost and need to ask for help. If those situations are not promptly resolved, the students' L2 learning will be interrupted and disturbed. These findings support those of Iswati and Hadimulyono (2018) who found that the EFL learners tend to use L1 as a beneficial tool to deal with difficult concepts in L2. The findings of the current study are also aligned with Shariati's (2019) findings which show that the students mostly use L1 when they are uncertain about their understanding and need to check the new vocabulary or grammatical structures. In

addition, it is somewhat surprising that, contrary to the common assumption, not many students let the shyness and the fear of making mistakes prevent them from using English. This result may be possibly explained by the fact that the participants of this study are all English majors. The participant then may have a certain determination for learning English and an awareness of the importance of practicing English.

In terms of the students' perceptions towards the teachers' use of L1, the results have demonstrated that the participants hold a slightly positive perception towards this issue. The students believe that the teachers' use of L1 is helpful and beneficial in many cases, especially in explaining complex grammar points and clarifying difficult and abstract concepts. The teachers' use of English is also reported to be effective in reducing pressure and making students more comfortable. These findings support the previous research confirming the facilitating of L1 in the EFL classroom (Debreli & Oyman, 2016; Phuong & Dang, 2021). In accordance with the study of Mahmud (2018), it is found that the students themselves are aware of the negative effects of overusing L1 and expect their teachers to use L1 only in necessary cases, for example, when the degree of incomprehensibility is high. The EFL teachers therefore are expected to understand the state of their students, even

from non-verbal behavior, in order to determine when and how to use the L1. The findings also indicated some degree of disagreement in students' expectations about the amount of Vietnamese should be used in the English classroom. This discrepancy could be attributed to English proficiency difference among the students because it has been proven that the learners' English level may partly determine their attitudes towards the use of L1 in the classroom (Shariati, 2019). In addition, the qualitative findings revealed that L1 appears to be most beneficial at the initial stage of the course when the students need to get used to new learning environment and their teachers' teaching styles. After the initial stage, this effect will fade over time and might results in unmotivated students if no adjustments are made. Therefore, gradually reducing the use of L1 according to the students' progress would be an approach worth considering.

## 5. Conclusion

The study has investigated the Vietnamese EFL students' reasons for using L1 in the English classroom and identified their perceptions towards their teachers' use of L1. The results showed that the participants generally appreciate the rational use of their mother tongue. Significantly, the way the English teachers use L1 may affect not only teaching and learning effectiveness but also the students' learning interest and motivation.

Regarding the students' use of L1, the students themselves have their own reasons for resorting to the L1. Indeed, L1 is used mostly when the students find their English insufficient to achieve communication purpose or when they feel the risk of misunderstanding something in L2 acquisition process, such as complex grammar points or difficult concepts.

Taken together, it is not encouraged to force the teachers and the students to completely eliminate L1 from the EFL classrooms. This policy might create a huge pressure, not only for the weak students but also for many teachers who have been struggled with the English proficiency gap among their students. It will be more effective to provide the EFL teachers with necessary pedagogical knowledge and skills which enable them to effectively diagnose the students' obstacles and adjust their use of L1. In view of the limited scope of this study, it was not possible to generalize the findings to other contexts due to the small sample size. Therefore, further research is strongly recommended to validate these findings on a larger scale. Another source of weakness is that the questionnaire did not investigate other influential factors such as the participants' self-efficacy, individual goals and learning interest. Especially, a greater focus on the relationship between the learners' proficiency level and their perceptions toward the use L1 could produce interesting findings.

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