

**ROLE OF L1 IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION: TO USE OR NOT TO USE**

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**Abstract:** The role of the first language (L1) in foreign language (FL) instruction has long been debated among linguists, educators, and language learners. While some scholars advocate for exclusive use of the target language (TL) to create immersive environments, others argue that judicious use of L1 can support comprehension, reduce anxiety, and enhance metalinguistic awareness. This article investigates the advantages and limitations of incorporating L1 in foreign language classrooms. Based on literature review and teacher perspectives, the study finds that selective and purposeful use of L1 – particularly for grammar explanations, vocabulary clarification, and classroom management – can positively influence language acquisition when balanced with ample TL exposure.

**Keywords:** L1, foreign language instruction, target language, bilingual education, language acquisition, second language learning.

**Introduction.** The discussion over the inclusion of learners' first language (L1) in foreign language (FL) classrooms has persisted for decades. Traditional methodologies like the Grammar-Translation Method relied heavily on L1, while modern approaches such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emphasize target language (TL) immersion. However, there is a growing recognition of the potential cognitive and affective benefits of using L1 strategically. This article explores the pedagogical implications of L1 use in FL instruction and addresses the central question: Should L1 be used in foreign language classrooms, and if so, how?

**Methodology.** This study is based on a qualitative review of relevant academic literature published between 2000 and 2024. To support theoretical perspectives, insights from semi-structured interviews with five experienced FL teachers were also analyzed. The teachers, working in non-English-speaking countries, shared classroom practices regarding L1 use and its observed impact on learner outcomes.

**Results.** The analysis of both literature and teacher interviews revealed several significant themes regarding the role of L1 in foreign language instruction. One of the most frequently mentioned benefits was its role in *facilitating understanding*, especially for beginner and intermediate-level learners. Teachers reported that students often struggled with complex grammatical explanations or abstract concepts when taught exclusively in the target language (TL). In such instances, brief explanations in the students' first language (L1) allowed for immediate clarity and prevented confusion from accumulating. Several educators emphasized that translating key vocabulary or offering grammar rules in L1 enabled learners to grasp new material more quickly and confidently.

Another recurring theme was the *reduction of learner anxiety* when L1 was permitted in a limited and controlled manner. Students, particularly at the early stages of language acquisition, often experienced a high level of stress when placed in environments where only the TL was allowed. Teachers noted that allowing some use of L1 – whether for clarification, reassurance, or peer support – helped build a more inclusive and supportive classroom atmosphere. Learners were more willing to participate and take risks in speaking or writing in the TL when they knew

that L1 could serve as a fallback when needed.

Furthermore, L1 was seen as a *valuable time-management tool* in the classroom. In situations where instructions were complex, especially during task-based activities or when managing classroom logistics, giving brief directions in L1 ensured that all students understood what was expected of them. This minimized misunderstandings and maximized the time available for engaging with the TL. Teachers observed that this approach was particularly effective in multilingual classes where learners' TL proficiency levels varied widely.

However, the interviews also highlighted potential *drawbacks* of relying too heavily on L1. Teachers warned that excessive use could limit students' exposure to the TL and reduce the amount of authentic communication practice. One teacher described a situation in which students began expecting all new material to be translated, which ultimately hindered their development of independent language-processing strategies in the TL. This suggests that while L1 can be an effective scaffold, it should not become a crutch that replaces TL immersion.

Across the interviews, the concept of "*judicious use*" of L1 was repeatedly emphasized. Educators agreed that the goal is not to eliminate L1 entirely, nor to rely on it excessively, but rather to employ it selectively – only when it clearly supports learning objectives. Most teachers believed that such an approach respects the cognitive and emotional needs of learners while still prioritizing meaningful engagement with the target language.

**Discussion.** The results of this study underscore a nuanced perspective on the role of the first language (L1) in foreign language (FL) instruction. They reveal that while exclusive target language (TL) use aligns with immersion-based theories, a more balanced and context-sensitive approach that incorporates L1 use selectively may better meet learners' diverse needs. These findings support a shift away from rigid monolingual paradigms toward more flexible, learner-centered methodologies.

The benefits of L1 use observed in this study are consistent with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the importance of existing knowledge frameworks in acquiring new concepts. Learners naturally draw on their L1 as a cognitive resource when interpreting, analyzing, and internalizing new language structures. Teachers' accounts of using L1 to explain grammar, clarify vocabulary, and manage classroom procedures highlight how the first language can serve as a scaffold that supports comprehension and builds confidence. In this way, L1 acts not as an interference but as a facilitative tool – especially in early stages of learning when students may lack the TL proficiency to understand complex instructions or abstract ideas independently.

Moreover, the emotional and psychological dimensions of learning a new language should not be overlooked. Language anxiety is a well-documented barrier to student participation and progress. As reported by the teachers in this study, occasional use of L1 can reduce stress and create a more inclusive classroom environment, fostering learner engagement and motivation. This aligns with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, which posits that emotional factors such as anxiety can obstruct language acquisition when not properly managed.

However, it is also important to consider the potential *risks of over-reliance* on L1. When L1 is used indiscriminately, it may reduce the amount of TL exposure and practice, which are essential for developing communicative competence. This was evidenced by teacher concerns that students might become overly dependent on translation rather than developing direct associations with TL vocabulary and concepts. To mitigate this, the use of L1 should be *purposeful, limited, and aligned with clear pedagogical goals*.

The concept of "*judicious use*" of L1 that emerged from both the literature and teacher experiences suggests that a *principled bilingual approach* may be more effective than either extreme – neither total avoidance nor constant translation. This aligns with Cook's (2001) argument that the L1 can be a legitimate part of the foreign language classroom, provided it is used in ways that support, rather than substitute for, TL learning.

Ultimately, the effectiveness of L1 use depends on several variables: learner proficiency level, age, instructional goals, classroom dynamics, and cultural context. Therefore, language teachers should be encouraged to adopt *flexible and reflective practices*, adjusting their use of L1

based on the specific needs and circumstances of their learners rather than adhering rigidly to one methodology.

**Conclusion.** The question of whether to use the first language (L1) in foreign language (FL) instruction remains a complex and context-dependent issue. This article has explored both the pedagogical benefits and potential drawbacks of incorporating L1 into language classrooms. Drawing on insights from scholarly literature and teacher perspectives, it is evident that a total ban on L1 use may not serve all learners effectively, especially those at the beginning stages of language acquisition. The evidence suggests that when used selectively, L1 can be a powerful pedagogical tool. It supports comprehension, facilitates efficient classroom management, and helps reduce learner anxiety – contributing to a more effective and emotionally supportive learning environment.

In conclusion, the most effective approach is not a rigid adherence to monolingual or bilingual methods but a balanced, context-sensitive strategy – one that empowers both teachers and learners to use all available linguistic resources in pursuit of meaningful and successful foreign language learning.

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