



## Indonesian EFL students' voice on the first language usage in classroom

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### ABSTRACT

The first language (L1) usage is still found during the English lesson, specifically in non-native English countries. This may be a debatable issue among experts. Hence, investigation on students' perception is helpful in this study. It will give an insight into students' preferences for learning the language. The previous studies related to this topic were mainly focused on senior high school and undergraduate students as the subject. Therefore, this present study proposed to explore the perception of junior high school students. In conducting this study, the researchers applied a quantitative survey design. There were 29 questions in three sections that were distributed to investigate: (1) the language used in the EFL classroom, (2) students' attitudes as well as (3) students' well-being during the English foreign language lesson. The participants were 101 students of SMP Shalahuddin Malang. The findings revealed that students have positive responses towards the use of Indonesian language during the EFL lesson.

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## 1. Introduction

Moeller and Catalano (2015) mentioned that foreign language refers to language that is not commonly spoken in the learner's society. This language is important for communication in international society including English. Therefore, English is taught and learned as a foreign language in various non-native English countries, Indonesia is not exempt. As a result, the Indonesian government has proposed English to be a compulsory subject in school (Nurkamto 2003, as cited in

Songbatumis, 2017). Lie (2007) argued that English has been officially taught in secondary school. Moreover, several big cities in Indonesia started to teach English from lower grades such as kindergarten and primary school (Lie, 2007).

Learning a foreign language may be difficult for particular first language students. They rarely heard people speak in English (Oybekovna, 2020). Hence, this language is unfamiliar for them. As claimed by Pande (2013), English is the most difficult subject for students (as cited in Songbatumis, 2017). Oybekovna (2020) also claimed that students have an effort to learn English inside the classroom. Therefore, in order to help students in learning a foreign language, teachers tolerated the first language usage in the EFL classroom. In Indonesia, English teachers use Indonesian language for some purposes such as explaining difficult material and promoting English learning motivation.

However, L1 usage in language learning has been a debatable phenomenon. Krashen (1982), a researcher in second language acquisition (SLA), argued that the input of a second language or foreign language has a similar route with first language acquisition. Therefore, foreign language learners should get the target language exposure as much as possible. In other words, successful and effective language acquisition occurs when applying a target language environment (Ghorbani, 2011). In line with that, Nation (1990) claimed that L1 prohibition has a negative impact which makes students feel that their mother tongue is inferior to the L2 (as cited in Alshehri, 2017).

On the other hand, the opponents, Enama (2016) proposed that the learning process of non-native language should be followed by learners' mother tongue as in one structure. In line with that, Paradowski (2008) stated that the first language usage will stimulate the former knowledge of the target language (as cited in Nurhamidah et al., 2018). Based on the EFL teachers' experience, the first language has a valuable role. A researcher, Inbar-Lourie (2010), as cited in (Mohebbi & Mohammad Alavi, 2014) found that teachers commonly implement students' first language for three main functions, they are instructional, managerial, and affective. Firstly, the instructional function is used to promote students' comprehension, make a clear understanding of grammar as well as new lexical items and concepts. Secondly, the managerial function helps teachers with classroom management and giving feedback. Lastly, affective function aims to facilitate a comfortable learning environment for learners.

Responding to the controversies, some studies related to the first language usage in EFL classrooms became the consideration in conducting this present study. First, Kitjaroonchai and Lampadan (2016) found that in Thailand, EFL undergraduate students preferred using English rather than using their mother tongue. Students believed that English exposure helped them in increasing learning motivation and engaged them to communicate in English since most of the teachers were native English teachers. In line with that, another study by Alzamil (2019) investigated the use of the first language in second language classrooms. The researcher used questionnaires as a research instrument to get information about the students' perception of the first language usage in the ESL classroom. He revealed that male college students in Saudi Arabia believe that the use of English is more beneficial than the first language.

On the other hand, different students' perceptions of the first language usage were then found in the Indonesian context, Larasaty et al. (2021) revealed positive results of students' perception

towards first language usage in the EFL classroom. This study employed a qualitative case study research method with only 22 students of grade XI in an Islamic senior high school. This result contradicted the two previous studies being discussed previously since they have different levels of participants. Kitjaroonchai and Lampadan (2016) and Alzamil (2019) conducted the study at the university level while Larasaty et al. (2021) investigated the secondary students. Concerning the different findings from those previous studies, the researchers were interested in coming up with a similar topic. The researchers then are curious to do the investigation on junior high school students' perception since it was sparsely conducted, specifically in Indonesia. Qiong (2017) pointed out that perception is a case of obtaining consciousness or recognition of sensory information. In case of exploring the students' perception towards L1 usage, this present study aimed to find the language preference of junior high school students during the teaching and learning process of English in the EFL classroom.

## 2. Method

This study was conducted by using a quantitative survey design. Creswell (2012) stated that a survey helps to determine important beliefs, characteristics, and attitudes from a sample or the whole population. In order to explore students' perception towards the interference of the first language in EFL classrooms, the survey design was relevant. It helps the researchers in gaining the data of large participants. The type of survey design used by the researchers was cross-sectional survey design since the data was gained at one point in time.

Junior high school students of SMP Shalahuddin Malang were chosen by the researchers as the population of the study. The participants were gained by using a convenience sampling procedure. They have been selected because of their availability and willingness to cooperate (Creswell, 2012). In total, 101 (54 male and 47 female) students from the first, second, and third grades participated. All of them are Indonesian native speakers and have experience of using Indonesian language as their first language during the English lesson.

The researchers adopted a questionnaire from Larasaty et al. (2021) research instrument to collect the data. The questionnaire comprised 29 close-ended questions with three categories. The first category was students' perceptions about language use in the EFL class. In total six questions were asked. Every question consists of five point Likert-scale to respond, ranging from "Never" to "Always". The data aimed to report the practice of both first language and foreign language use. The second category comprises seventeen statements to explore students' attitudes regarding first and foreign language use during English lessons. Five point Likert-scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree" were administered. The last section concerned the students' well-being when they were attending an EFL classroom. Six questions were handed to examine their conditions during learning the language. The response options were similar to the second category, ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree".

In conducting this research, the writer followed the Creswell (2012) research procedures. There were six steps as followed: (1) describing the phenomena of the first language usage in the non-native English classroom, (2) providing the literature review related to the first language usage in English classrooms, (3) designing the purpose statement of the study, (4) collecting numeric data from a

sample with an adopted instrument, (5) identifying the phenomena and interpreting the results, and (6) writing the research report.

### 3. Results and discussion

#### 3.1. The language usage in The EFL classroom

The result of the non-native English students' responses revealed in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Students' Perception towards Language Use in the English Classroom

No	Language use in the English classroom	Always	Often	Seldom	Rarely	Never
1	How often does the teacher speak English during lessons?	8,9%	47,5%	42,6%	1%	0%
2	How often do you speak English during lessons?	0%	4%	21,8%	50,5%	23,8%
3	When you ask the teacher something, how often do you ask in English?	0%	1%	9,9%	34,7%	54,5%
4	How often do you answer the teacher in English when he asks you questions in English?	0%	3%	28,7%	36,6%	31,7%
5	How often do you speak English with your classmates during lessons?	0%	4%	5%	19,8%	71,3%
6	When you have pair or group work, how often do you speak English?	0%	2%	15,8%	23,8%	58,4%

The research instrument adopted from Larasaty et al. (2021)

Table 1 showed that students are using less English than the teachers during the lessons. A similar result showed in Sibarani (2019) study, which researched senior high school students. It was found that the frequency of teachers' English speaking was higher than students. The result of question number 2 reveals that more than half of the students rarely spoke English. In other words, mainly students were often using their first language (Indonesian language) in the EFL classroom.

Additionally, statements number three and four indicated that teachers were allowing students to use their mother tongue. It was difficult for them to facilitate learning without any intervention of students' first language. The SLA experts, Nunan and Lamb, claimed that EFL teachers who were dealing with lower levels of English proficiency were practically unable to prevent the students' mother tongue (as cited in Zakaria, 2013). This was intended to promote students' better understanding and motivation in learning the target language.

Furthermore, statements number five and six revealed that students never use English-only during interaction with classmates. As claimed by Storch and Aldosari (2010), learners in foreign

language contexts may be particularly high in using L1 where they share the same language. Solhi and Büyükyazý (2011) explained that conversation and discussion are done using L1 among students in EFL classrooms because it is more natural and communicatively effective.

### 3.2. The students' attitudes towards the use of the first language

The result of the second section revealed in the Table 2.

**Table 2.** Students' attitudes towards language usage in the English classroom

No	Attitudes towards language usage in English classroom	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
7	I think it is important that the teacher speaks only English during lessons.	7,9%	43,6%	8,9%	38,6%	1%
8	I think the students should always speak English during lessons.	1%	27,7%	17,8%	48,5%	5%
9	I think instructions for assignments should be in Bahasa Indonesia.	24,8%	46,5%	6,9%	20,8%	1%
10	I think the teacher should use First Language (L1) when he is explaining something difficult, like grammar or vocabulary.	37,6%	50,5%	6,9%	5%	0%
11	I think the teacher should use First Language (L1) Indonesia to discipline students.	31,7%	55,4%	5%	6,9%	1%
12	I think the teacher should use First Language (L1) when he is discussing with students about something that is not class related.	34,7%	47,5%	11,9%	5,9%	0%
13	I think the teacher should use First Language (L1) when he is assigning homework.	16,8%	52,5%	11,9%	17,8%	1%
14	I think the teacher should use First Language (L1) to ask students questions.	18,8%	48,5%	13,9%	17,8%	1%
15	I think the teacher should use First Language (L1) to praise or correct students.	15,8%	49,5%	13,9%	18,8%	2%
16	I often do not understand what I am supposed to do because the teacher only explains in English.	10,9%	56,4%	12,9%	18,8%	1%
17	It is easier to learn the language because the teacher only speaks English.	2%	16,8%	21,8%	57,4%	2%

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18	It is easier for me to speak English because I get a lot of practice at school.	6,9%	27,7%	16,8%	47,5%	1%
19	I think my grammar has improved because the teacher speaks mostly English.	9,9%	43,6%	21,8%	24,8%	0%
20	I think my vocabulary has improved because the teacher speaks mostly English.	9,9%	53,5%	15,8%	20,8%	0%
21	I think my English accent has improved because I get to practice speaking during English lessons.	9,9%	54,5%	15,8%	19,8%	0%
22	I think the more English the teacher speaks; the better the students will be in English.	14,9%	56,4%	13,9%	14,9%	0%
23	I think I have to speak English during lessons to really learn the language.	9,9%	31,7%	18,8%	35,6%	4%

The research instrument adopted from Larasaty et al. (2021)

The result of Table 2, statements number seven and eight revealed that students agree about the essential English language usage by the teachers during English lessons, but students suggest the interference of the first language. As in statement number nine, students prefer if the teacher uses Indonesian language for instructing the assignment. This is in line with Zakaria (2013) who pointed out that students need to have a clear understanding of what they have to do. Therefore, teachers might use students' first language when explaining an instruction for a difficult assignment.

The next statements, numbers ten, eleven, twelve, and thirteen most of the students agree that teachers use L1 for some roles: (1) explain something difficult such as grammar and vocabulary, (2) discipline students, (3) interact with students, and (4) assign homework. This is in line with previous research findings, both teachers and students agreed that the purpose of the first language was to explain grammar points, make clear new vocabularies, clarify complex ideas, and give directions (Alshammari, 2011; Kitjaroonchai & Lampadan, 2016). In addition, Tsagari and Diakou (2015) highlighted that teachers were mainly using L1 to interact informally with students. Furthermore, Cook (2001) suggested teachers use L1 for classroom management such as organizing tasks, disciplining students, and communicating with individual students.

Statements number fourteen and fifteen expressed that students agree when teachers use L1 for asking questions and praising or correcting students. It might be caused by students' difficulty to understand teachers' English-only speaking. This was supported by statements number sixteen and seventeen, most of the students stated that they find it difficult to understand and learn when teachers only explain in English. Ismaili (2015) pointed out that students feel helpful when teachers use the first language when students cannot understand teachers' complex questions.

Statements number nineteen until twenty-two showed that teachers' English-speaking exposure helped students to improve students' grammar, vocabulary, and even accent. These findings propose the importance of exposing English more than Indonesian language. Even though teachers need to use students' first language, it should be minimized during EFL classroom (Zakaria, 2013). Additionally, Kirahla and Tyas (2020) pointed out the importance of teacher talk as input for EFL students. The researchers, Kirahla and Tyas (2020), claimed that teachers should use simple diction in classroom interaction because what they say must be understandable and absorbable for students. Therefore, it can be a solution to minimize the use of Indonesian language in the EFL classroom.

### 3.3. The student's well-being during English lessons

Table 3 presents the result of students' responses.

**Table 3.** Students' perception of well-being during learning the English lesson

No	Language use in the English classroom	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
24	I most often feel good during lessons.	19,8%	41,6%	24,8%	13,9%	0%
25	Sometimes I feel bad or uncomfortable for having to speak English in front of the whole class.	20,8%	37,6%	17,8%	22,8%	1%
26	I am shy to speak English.	16,8%	44,6%	17,8%	18,8%	2%
27	I am afraid that other students will make fun of me when I am speaking English.	12,9%	32,7%	20,8%	30,7%	3%
28	I often get frustrated because I do not understand what the teacher is saying in English.	8,9%	40,6%	24,8%	21,8%	4%
29	It is difficult to talk to the teacher and get to know him because I mostly have to speak English with him.	9,9%	45,5%	20,8%	22,8%	1%

The research instrument adopted from Larasaty et al. (2021)

From Table 3, the findings are in line with a previous study of Alshammari (2011), who found in his research that first language usage encourages students to feel comfortable and less stressed. Another researcher, Zakaria (2013), stated that there are students with high levels of anxiety and very shy in the classroom. They feel embarrassed especially when making mistakes while speaking English. In this case, the role of first language usage helped students to maintain their English learning motivation. Moreover, the comfortable learning environment could keep students willing to use the target language. As stated by Harbord (1992), the English-only classroom was inadequate in meaningful communication and prompted student incomprehension and resentment (as cited in Mahmutođlu & KÝcýr, 2013). Therefore, teachers were allowed to use L1 for asking, answering questions, and doing discussions. Ismaili (2015) reported that students become more confident in asking questions when



teachers use L1. As shown from the first discussion, in the first section, teachers and students were including their first language during English lessons. It aimed to help students who faced difficulties in understanding the material and the teacher's explanations.

#### 4. Conclusion

Four conclusions were drawn according to the previous discussion. First, the EFL teacher allowed the students to use Indonesian language. The percentage of teachers using English was higher than the number of students. It means that students have a positive perception of the use of Indonesian language in EFL class. Second, most non-native English students agree that the interference of their mother tongue should be permitted with more English exposure from teachers. They agree that teachers use Indonesian language for explaining something difficult such as vocabulary and grammar, interacting with students in casual situations, and making clear complicated instructions. It is hard for students if teachers apply to an English-only classroom. Third, students agree that exposure to English helps them to improve their grammar, vocabulary, and English accent. Fourth, students feel comfortable if they use their mother tongue during the EFL class. Apart from those findings, this study has two limitations. Firstly, participants were taken to a single school. Therefore, the findings could not be addressed for all EFL learners in Indonesia. It is suggested for future researchers to gain higher samples from various schools. The second one, this study was simply conducted in a survey research design. Future research using the mixed-method design is recommended to get deeper findings. Additionally, various studies related to the first language usage in EFL classrooms also recommended such as experimental research to examine the effectiveness of students' L1 instructions in EFL classroom, classroom action research to improve students learning motivation by the first language usage during EFL learning, and correlation study to explore the correlation of first language usage with students' English proficiency.

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