



Bridging the Gap: The Effect of Using the Mother Tongue in Bangladeshi ELT Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

This survey-based quantitative study investigates the role of the mother tongue (L1) in English language learning and its effects in English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms at the tertiary level in Bangladesh. The research aims to explore how the use of L1 influences students' comprehension, participation, and overall learning outcomes. A total of 80 students from the University of Global Village, University of Barishal, and Khulna University participated in the study through a structured questionnaire. Both quantitative and qualitative data (through open-ended questionnaire responses) were collected and analyzed to identify patterns and perceptions regarding L1 use. The findings reveal that a majority of students perceive the controlled use of L1 as supportive for understanding complex grammar and vocabulary, facilitating classroom interaction, and enhancing confidence. However, some participants indicated that excessive reliance on L1 might hinder English fluency. The study highlights the importance of a balanced approach or bilingual pedagogy suggesting that judicious integration of L1 can enhance learning effectiveness without compromising target language proficiency. These findings provide insights for ELT practitioners and policymakers to optimize classroom strategies that incorporate students' mother tongue effectively.

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INTRODUCTION

The debate over whether to use the first language (L1) in ELT classrooms is a longstanding one, with arguments on both sides. Many linguists like Atkinson (1987), Harbord (1992) and Nation (2003) agree that using a learner's L1 (first

language) in an ELT (English Language Teaching) classroom can be beneficial, as it can aid comprehension, build confidence, and facilitate learning by providing a bridge to understanding new concepts in the target language. While some other researchers believe that the use of L1 is a barrier to learning L2 (e.g. Mahadeo, 2006; Tsao 2001).

Teaching English at the tertiary level in Bangladesh presents a unique set of challenges. Bangla the only official language and the sole medium of instruction at all levels of education (Haque, 1989). English is taught as a compulsory subject for twelve years in the national curriculum. But the level of proficiency they rich is truly poor.

Most of the students of university come from Bangla medium school. When the students are given English speaking course at university, teachers face multiple challenges to teach. The majority of English language teaching takes place in classrooms where both the students and the teacher share the same L1 (first language) due to the poor understanding level of English. Thus this paper aims to investigate whether the use of L1- Bengali, is helpful in English Language Teaching in Tertiary level of Bangladesh.

However, there is still a noticeable gap in empirical research specifically addressing how Bangladeshi university students perceive the role of L1 in ELT classrooms. Much of the existing scholarship discusses the global debate on L1 use but provides limited context-specific evidence from Bangladesh. Filling this gap is crucial because it can inform localized teaching strategies that better reflect students' realities. Moreover, the significance of this study extends beyond academic interest: for teachers, the findings can guide more effective classroom practices, and for policymakers, they can offer insights into curriculum development and teacher training initiatives that balance English proficiency goals with practical classroom needs. Guided by these concerns, the study seeks to answer the following questions: (1) To what extent and in which situations is Bangla used in English classrooms? (2) How does L1 support or hinder English acquisition? (3) In what situations is L1 most beneficial for students' learning?

Since Bangladesh is a monolingual country, an English-speaking atmosphere can only be established within the language school. This paper aims to find out that in what extent and which situation Bangla is used. The study also wants to discover the effects of L1 use on English language learning and to explore the advantages and disadvantages of incorporating L1.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The debate on L1 use in ELT is also informed by several theoretical perspectives. The Direct Method, emerging in the late nineteenth century, emphasized exclusive use of the target language and discouraged reliance on the learners' mother tongue (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). In contrast, Communicative

Language Teaching (CLT), which gained prominence in the 1970s, valued communicative competence and encouraged authentic language use (Hymes, 1972). Another important perspective is the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH), which highlights the influence of the native language and predicts learning difficulties by comparing L1 and L2 structures (Lado, 1957; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991). Finally, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (SCT) underscores the role of the first language as a mediational tool in scaffolding second language learning within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). From this perspective, L1 serves not as an obstacle but as a bridge that supports comprehension, collaboration, and confidence in L2 acquisition.

The role of the first language (L1) in English Language Teaching (ELT) has been a long-debated issue in applied linguistics. While traditional language teaching methods such as the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) heavily relied on the mother tongue, later approaches like the Direct Method and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) discouraged or even prohibited its use, emphasizing maximum exposure to the target language (L2) (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). However, recent scholarship suggests that the strategic and judicious use of L1 can be an effective pedagogical tool in multilingual classrooms.

During the mid-20th century, the rise of behaviorism and later communicative approaches positioned L1 as an obstacle to language learning. Influential theorists like Krashen (1982) argued that L2 acquisition depends on comprehensible input and that L1 interference should be minimized. Similarly, proponents of immersion programs stressed the "English-only" principle, assuming that greater exposure would lead to greater proficiency (Turnbull & Dailey-O'Cain, 2009).

Recent sociocultural perspectives, particularly those inspired by Vygotsky (1978), emphasize that learning is a socially mediated process where L1 can scaffold learners' understanding. Several studies (Cook, 2001; Nation, 2003) argue that using the mother tongue can reduce anxiety, clarify complex grammar rules, facilitate vocabulary learning, and provide learners with a cognitive bridge between known and unknown linguistic systems. Research also shows that L1 use can foster learner identity and confidence in multilingual classrooms (Cummins, 2007).

On the other hand, opponents warn against overreliance on the mother tongue, which may reduce opportunities for authentic communication in English and slow down learners' natural acquisition process (Macdonald, 1993). Excessive L1 use might also reinforce translation habits rather than developing communicative competence, thereby hindering fluency (Harmer, 2007).

Tang (2002) found that limited and purposeful use of L1 in Chinese EFL classrooms enhanced comprehension without hindering L2 development. Similarly, Butzkamm and Caldwell (2009) demonstrated that bilingual techniques can help learners grasp abstract concepts faster. Conversely, studies in immersion contexts

(e.g., Swain & Lapkin, 2000) reveal that exclusive L2 environments may be more beneficial for developing communicative competence, particularly in advanced learners.

Contemporary scholars advocate for a balanced approach where the use of L1 is not entirely banned but strategically employed as a pedagogical resource (Hall & Cook, 2012). The concept of translanguaging (García & Wei, 2014) has further broadened this perspective, viewing L1 and L2 not as separate entities but as interconnected resources that learners flexibly draw upon. In the context of ELT classrooms, especially in countries where English is taught as a foreign language, the mother tongue can serve as a vital support for comprehension, participation, and deeper learning.

METHOD

Research Design

The study adopted a quantitative survey research design to examine the role of the first language (L1) in English learning and to explore the effect of using the mother tongue in English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms. A google form questionnaire was selected as the primary data collection tool because it enables the researcher to gather information efficiently from a larger group of participants and to quantify their opinions, attitudes, and experiences.

The primary instrument was a structured questionnaire developed by the researcher, with reference to previous studies on L1 use in English Language Teaching (e.g., Atkinson, 1987; Cook, 2001; Nation, 2003). Items were adapted and contextualized to suit the Bangladeshi tertiary education context. The questionnaire was divided into two sections: (1) demographic information (e.g., age, gender, university, and academic year), and (2) research questions focused on students' perceptions, featuring predominantly five-point Likert scale items (Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree) and one open-ended question to collect qualitative insights. To ensure content validity, the questionnaire items were reviewed by two ELT experts, and a small pilot test with 10 students was conducted prior to full data collection. Feedback from this process helped refine the wording and clarity of several items. The items addressed the extent to which L1 is employed in English classrooms, its pedagogical effectiveness in facilitating comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and grammar learning, as well as the potential challenges and constraints inherent in its use within ELT contexts.

The link to the Google Form was shared with 80 undergraduate students from the University of Global Village, University of Barisal, and Khulna University through institutional communication channels and student networks. Before responding, the participants were informed about the purpose of the study and assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. The data collected through the google form questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequency,

percentage, mean, and standard deviation) to identify overall trends and patterns. The inclusion of open-ended responses allowed for basic thematic analysis, which helped explain and support the quantitative results.

Participants

A total of 80 undergraduate students participated in this study. The participants were purposively selected from three higher education institutions in Bangladesh: University of Global Village, University of Barisal, and Khulna University. These institutions were chosen to ensure diversity in terms of academic environment and student backgrounds.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Category	Number (N)	Percentage (%)
Total Participants	80	100.0
University of Global Village	28	31.3
University of Barisal	25	35.0
Khulna University	27	33.7
Male Students	38	47.5
Female Students	42	52.5
First-year Students	20	25.0
Second-year Students	17	21.25
Third-year Students	19	23.75
Fourth-year Students	14	17.5
MA in ELT	10	12.5

The sample included students from different academic years who were enrolled in English language courses. All participants had prior experience of learning English in classroom settings where the use of the first language (L1) occasionally occurred. Their inclusion was intended to provide insights into learners' perceptions of how the use of the mother tongue influences English learning.

Participation was voluntary, and students were informed about the objectives of the study before completing the questionnaire. The anonymity and confidentiality of all responses were strictly maintained.

Although purposive sampling was appropriate for accessing students with direct experience of L1 use in ELT, the strategy may limit the representativeness of the findings. Therefore, the results should be interpreted with caution and not generalized to all Bangladeshi tertiary students.

Data Collection

The data for this study were collected using a structured questionnaire administered through Google Forms to investigate the role of the first language (L1) in English learning and its effect in ELT classrooms. The online questionnaire was chosen for its accessibility, efficiency, and ability to reach students from multiple universities simultaneously.

Prior to data collection, permission was obtained from the departments of the University of Global Village, university of Barishal, and Khulna University. Students were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the confidentiality of their responses.

The questionnaire consisted of two main sections. The first section collected demographic information, including name, age, gender, university, and academic year, location to contextualize the participants' responses. The second section focused on the main research questions, featuring predominantly five-point Likert scale items (Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree) to measure students' perceptions, attitudes, and experiences regarding L1 use in English classrooms. An open-ended question was included to allow participants to elaborate on their opinions and provide qualitative insights.

The questionnaire link was shared with 80 undergraduate students from the three universities via classroom WhatsApp groups, messenger group and other communication channels. Participants were given sufficient time to complete the questionnaire at their convenience. Reminder messages were sent periodically to ensure a high response rate.

Once the data collection period concluded, the responses were automatically stored in Google Sheets, which facilitated efficient organization and initial review. The data were then prepared for analysis: closed-ended items were coded for quantitative analysis using descriptive statistics, while responses to open-ended question was analyzed thematically to capture qualitative insights.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The questionnaire explored students' perceptions of using their mother tongue (L1) in English language learning. A total of 80 respondents from different universities participated. The findings reveal a generally positive attitude toward the supportive role of L1 in English classrooms.

Most participants reported that L1 facilitates understanding of English grammar, with 22.4% strongly agreeing and 54.2% agreeing, while only 9.4% disagreed to some extent. Similarly, 86% (strongly agree + agree) stated that learning new vocabulary becomes easier when teachers provide explanations in L1.

A large proportion (90.6%) agreed that translating between English and L1 helps them remember vocabulary better. Confidence in learning also increased when teachers used L1, with 82.2% agreeing or strongly agreeing. In terms of classroom instructions, 87% felt that teachers' use of L1 made instructions easier to follow.

Group and pair work were also positively influenced, as 86% believed that L1 helped them complete tasks more effectively. Moreover, 79.5% reported feeling more comfortable asking questions when L1 was permitted, and 78.5% felt that classroom discussions were more productive with some L1 use.

Regarding emotional factors, 80.4% agreed that L1 reduced their anxiety when they did not fully understand English. However, some reservations were also noted. For example, 45.1% of students preferred teachers to use only English, while 46.5% expressed concern that relying too much on L1 might reduce their confidence in speaking English.

Interestingly, 72% agreed that using L1 makes English learning more enjoyable. Yet, 73.9% felt that L1 should be used only when absolutely necessary, indicating that students value a balance between L1 and English use.

Table 2. Students' Perceptions of L1 Use in English Classrooms

Questionnaire Item	Percentage (%)
L1 facilitates understanding of English grammar	22.4% Strongly Agree, 54.2% Agree, 9.4% Disagree
Learning new vocabulary is easier with L1 explanations	86.0% Agree/Strongly Agree
Translating between English and L1 helps remember vocabulary	90.6% Agree/Strongly Agree
Confidence in learning increases with teacher's use of L1	82.2% Agree/Strongly Agree
L1 makes classroom instructions easier to follow	87.0% Agree/Strongly Agree
L1 helps in completing group and pair work effectively	86.0% Agree/Strongly Agree
Comfortable asking questions when L1 is permitted	79.5% Agree/Strongly Agree
Classroom discussions are more productive with L1	78.5% Agree/Strongly Agree
L1 reduces anxiety when English is not fully understood	80.4% Agree/Strongly Agree
Prefer teachers to use only English	45.1% Prefer only English
Overreliance on L1 reduces confidence in speaking English	46.5% Concern about reduced confidence
Using L1 makes English learning more enjoyable	72.0% Agree/Strongly Agree
L1 should be used only when absolutely necessary	73.9% Agree L1 only when necessary

Overall, the results demonstrate that students view L1 as a helpful tool for comprehension, vocabulary learning, and reducing anxiety, though many also acknowledge the need to limit its use to avoid dependency.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that students hold a largely positive attitude toward the use of their mother tongue (L1) in English language classrooms. The data consistently show that L1 supports comprehension, confidence, and classroom participation. For example, a significant majority of participants (over 75%) agreed that L1 helps them understand complex grammar rules and acquire new vocabulary more effectively. This aligns with recent studies, such as Orfan (2023), who found that instructors in Afghanistan use L1 to explain vocabulary, grammar, and concepts

in lower-level classes, and Aybirdi, Han, and Şahin (2023), who reported that Turkish teachers often used L1 for instructions, vocabulary explanation, and classroom management.

Another important outcome concerns confidence and classroom engagement. More than 80% of students reported feeling more comfortable asking questions and participating in discussions when L1 was allowed. This resonates with Motbaynor (2024), who emphasized that L1 use contributes to rapport-building, student engagement, and affective learning. Similarly, Karafil and Ilbay (2023) confirmed that L1 can be a strategic pedagogical resource, although cautioning against excessive reliance.

However, the study also highlights some reservations among students. Approximately 45% expressed a preference for exclusive English instruction, and more than 46% believed that overreliance on L1 could hinder their confidence in speaking English. These concerns mirror findings from Taner and Balıkçı (2022), who noted that pre-service teachers tend to support English-only policies, while experienced teachers adopt more moderate approaches. Moreover, systematic reviews on translanguaging (e.g., MDPI, 2023) show that while L1 use supports vocabulary and writing, its benefits are less clear for grammar and accuracy, reinforcing the need for careful balance.

Rather than treating these responses as contradictory, they can be understood through a translanguaging perspective, which views L1 and L2 not as competing but as complementary resources. Students' support for strategic L1 use, alongside their caution about overreliance, suggests an intuitive awareness of translanguaging principles—where both languages can coexist to maximize comprehension, reduce anxiety, and foster identity without undermining English proficiency. This is in line with recent scholarship advocating for context-sensitive bilingual pedagogy (Karafil & Ilbay, 2023; Orfan, 2023).

Interestingly, most students (72%) agreed that L1 makes English learning more enjoyable, yet 73.9% felt it should only be used when absolutely necessary. This dual perspective implies that learners seek a balanced approach: they want the reassurance of L1 for difficult concepts and instructions, but they also desire sufficient exposure to English to strengthen their proficiency.

When placed in a broader regional context, these findings resonate with similar studies. For instance, Orfan (2023) in Afghanistan and Aybirdi et al. (2023) in Turkey confirm that purposeful use of L1 enhances comprehension and reduces anxiety. At the same time, the systematic review of translanguaging practices (MDPI, 2023) highlights the importance of avoiding overdependence. Together, these studies reinforce that the Bangladeshi context fits within a wider trend advocating for flexible, bilingual pedagogies rather than rigid “English-only” rules.

Overall, the discussion reveals that students do not advocate for complete reliance on L1, nor for its total exclusion. Instead, they favor a strategic and judicious

use of the mother tongue—particularly in grammar explanations, vocabulary instruction, and reducing classroom anxiety. This critical balance between benefits and drawbacks reinforces the need for Bangladeshi ELT to move toward translanguaging-informed practices, where both policymakers and teachers can design strategies that value L1 as a resource while ensuring English remains the dominant medium of communication.

CONCLUSION

This study explored students' perceptions of using their mother tongue (L1) in English language classrooms, with a particular focus on the realities of mixed classrooms. The results show that most learners view L1 as a valuable tool for understanding grammar and vocabulary, building confidence, following classroom instructions, and reducing anxiety. In mixed settings, where proficiency levels vary, L1 serves as a scaffold that supports weaker students while creating a more inclusive learning environment.

At the same time, the findings reveal concerns about overdependence on L1. A considerable proportion of students expressed a preference for maximizing English use, and many believed that heavy reliance on L1 might reduce their confidence in speaking English. This suggests that while students recognize the benefits of their mother tongue, they also understand the importance of English exposure for long-term proficiency.

Therefore, the conclusion drawn from this study is that students do not advocate for either extreme—total exclusion or full reliance on L1. Instead, they favor a balanced, strategic use of the mother tongue. In practical terms, this means integrating L1 in specific teaching moments rather than as a default mode of communication. For example, teachers may use L1 selectively to explain complex grammar rules, clarify abstract vocabulary, or give quick instructions that ensure task understanding. Similarly, brief L1 support can be helpful in lowering anxiety during initial stages of classroom discussion, after which English should dominate the interaction. These findings highlight the importance of adopting a flexible bilingual pedagogy in Bangladeshi ELT classrooms, particularly in mixed-level settings. Teachers should view L1 not as a hindrance but as a supportive resource that, when used judiciously, can enhance comprehension, participation, and learner confidence. For policymakers, the implication is to provide teacher training that emphasizes how and when to use L1 effectively, rather than imposing rigid English-only rules. Future research may extend this study by investigating teachers' perspectives and observing classroom practices to further understand how L1 can be most effectively integrated into English teaching.

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