



Thai EFL School Students' Perceptions of Using L1 in English Language Classrooms

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Introduction

The incorporation of L1 in foreign language classrooms has caused immense unsettled debates among varied researchers and teachers (Iswati & Hadimulyono, 2018). Some believe that when L1 is used appropriately in the classrooms, it positively contributes to L2 learning (Choi & Leung, 2017). The belief is that the use of L1 eases students' learning process with a greater chance of language development since most of the complex materials and concepts related to the target language can be taught in the student's first language (Bartlett, 2017; Bruen & Kelly, 2017). L1 usage in the classroom is also believed to help build a good rapport with students by creating a conducive and friendly learning environment (Bruen & Kelly, 2017; Saliu, 2017). L1 has therefore become an inseparable medium of instruction in L2 language classrooms and many teachers have been rejecting the assumption made that the medium of instruction should be only in the target language (Sadighi, 2018). Teachers perceive L1 usage in EFL classrooms as useful for learners (Sevim & Turhanli, 2019; Turhanli, 2018).

However, there are a number of arguments against the use of L1 in the EFL context. Despite L1 usage being viewed as a useful method in teaching a second language in EFL contexts, it has its limitations (Ibrahim, 2019). For instance, Krashen (1981) and Manara (2007) argued that target language can be only acquired successfully by maximizing the language exposure to the learners. In addition, De la Campa and Nassaji (2009) and Çelik and Aydın (2018) also noted that excessive use of L1 in the L2 classroom is disadvantageous for learners as it impedes learner's opportunity to hear the target language resulting in unable to develop speaking skills.

While some researchers claim that L1 use in L2 classrooms should be discouraged, others argue that the use of L1 is beneficial particularly in EFL classrooms (Debreli & Oyman, 2016). Given this, many studies were conducted in the EFL context, most of which emphasized teachers' and students' beliefs, attitudes and perceptions of L1 usage in the EFL context. However, a careful reading of literature revealed that further study is needed in the light of EFL students' views on using L1 in the English classroom. Also, very few studies on this topic 'L1 use in the English classroom' have emphasized the driving forces behind their belief on why L1 should/should not be used in the L2 classes, particularly in the Thai EFL context. This was an added reason to conduct this study. Thus, this study aimed at investigating school students' general perception of using L1 in the English classroom, and the forces behind their beliefs.



Research Questions

This study has the following research questions.

- 1) How do Thai EFL students perceive using L1 in English classrooms?
- 2) What are the forces behind their beliefs?

Related Studies on Students' Perception of Using L1 in English Classroom

Although most of the previous studies had reported similar and positive findings on students' perception of using L1 in English language classrooms, a sparing number of studies refuted this position (Manara, 2007; Resmini, 2019). Some recent studies on second or foreign language learners' perceptions of using L1 in English or L2 classrooms are reviewed in this section.

A study conducted by Debreli and Oyman (2016) by taking a sample of 303 Turkish EFL learners explored students' perspectives of using L1 (Turkish) in learning the L2 (English) language. The researchers concluded that Turkish EFL students highly recommend the use of L1 in L2 classes. They also underscored that less proficient level students have higher demands of L1 in the L2 classroom compared to the more proficient students. A similar study was conducted in the different EFL contexts by Almohaimeed and Almurshed (2018). In their study, a sample of 60 Arab EFL female students participated. The students' perceptions of the use of L1 (Arab) in the English classroom were investigated with different English language proficiency. Although they have reported that low proficient learners perceived the use of L1 as more helpful, in general, the majority of their participants acknowledge L1 use in the L2 classes as useful.

Likewise, Payne and Contreras (2019) looked into Ecuadorian EFL students' perception of the use of the first language in the English classroom. A total of 115 students from the national university of education of Ecuador participated in their study. These students were divided into two groups, namely lower-level and upper-level groups based on their CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) levels. The study found that more than half of the participants in both levels perceive L1 use in the English classroom as useful, of which the majority were from the lower-level group. The researchers concluded that occasional use of L1 in the language should be considered, particularly with low-level language learners for it helps them to understand the content of the language better.

It was not different in the other EFL contexts, the study conducted in the Korean EFL context by Kim et al. (2017) by using a survey questionnaire with 524 engineering undergraduate students also pointed out that the students prefer the use of L1 (Korean) in English classrooms. In this study, the students also commented that L2 only doesn't help make much difference in their English language ability. Galali and Cinkara (2017) have also conducted a similar study with 258 EFL students from Salahaddin University, Iraq. The researchers employed a mixed-method design using survey questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Upon investigating, the researchers have concluded a careful use of L1 in target language classrooms is beneficial to the students. They have pointed out several benefits in using L1 in the target language classroom such as improving the learning environment, learners' academic performance and motivation.

On the other hand, Resmini (2019) claims that Indonesian students had a negative perception towards the teacher's use of L1 (Bahasa Indonesia) in the English classroom. The researcher collected data from 40 EFL Indonesian students by using a survey questionnaire and observation. The findings of this study concluded that Indonesian students prefer teachers to use English medium in the English classroom though they are aware of the benefits L1 use has in learning English vocabulary and grammar structure through translation. Resmini (2019) disagreed with Nursanti (2016) of the same context, in which the study reported students having a positive perception towards L1 use in the L2 classroom.

Methodology

The study adopted a mixed-method design since data collection involved both quantitative and qualitative phases. The mixed-method design was used because the belief is that it helps researchers uncover a deeper insight of the research conducted by complimenting each other (Riazi & Candlin, 2014). All data for this study were collected through survey questionnaires and open-ended questions.

Research Context and Participants

The ideology of English as a language of development and globalization has given a new impulse to the English language across non-native English-speaking countries. There has been a consistent increase in the emphasis on English language education specifically among ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nation) countries, especially in Thailand (Baker & Jarunthawatchai, 2017). Ever since English was identified as one of the prominent foreign languages in Thailand, English was set as a compulsory subject at schools from grade 1 to 12, and university students were required to study a minimum of 12 credits of English language (Trakulkasemsuk, 2018). Nevertheless, Thais in general are not satisfied with the outcome of the English language. Noom-Ura (2013) has stated that Thai students' English language proficiency is relatively low when compared to other ASEAN neighboring countries.

This study was conducted in schools in Southern Thailand. A total of 535, 188 males and 347 females from various schools participated in this study. All participants in this study were Thai natives who were learning English as a foreign language.

Research Instrument

The research instrument was categorized into two parts. Part one which was a 5 Likert scale survey questionnaire ranging from strongly disagree = 1 to strongly agree = 5 (adapted from Wach & Monroy, 2020) consisted of 14 items that dealt with students' perception of L1 usage in English language classrooms. Part two consisted of two open-ended questions on why L1 should/should not be used in English language classroom.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data was collected via an online platform using Google Forms and QR codes from the respective classes at different schools as it fell during the peak of the covid pandemic for the present context. Before proceeding with data collection, teachers who were involved in data collection were requested to inform students that data is being collected solely for the research purpose and that it is in no way going to affect students' academic scores. Also, both teachers, as well as students, were given the option of not taking part in this study by not responding to the survey respectively.

Data analysis involved descriptive analysis such as mean and standard deviation for the first question. The findings were then descriptively presented to answer the present research objective. As for the qualitative section, where we investigated the driving forces behind students' belief in L1 usage in the English language classroom through open-ended questions, we followed Braun and Clarke (2006) method to analyze sub-themes developed based on their beliefs under the main theme 'the forces behind students' beliefs of L1 usage in English language classroom'. Consequently, two sub-themes namely 'L1 should be used in English classroom' and 'L1 should not be used in English classroom' were generated. The thematic analysis involved data transcribing, coding, collating and finally compiling excerpts of open-ended questions under each sub-theme.

Results

Q1. How do Thai EFL Students Perceive Using L1 in English Classrooms?

The findings from participants concerning their perception of using L1 in English classrooms is presented below. Descriptive analyses such as mean and median was calculated to determine students' agreement in using L1 (Thai) in English language classrooms. The findings are descriptively discussed to answer the first research questions.

TABLE 1
Respondents' Perception of Using L1 in English Classrooms

Items	n	mean	SD
1) In schools' English classroom, it is best if organizational issues (checking attendance, materials preparation, etc.) are explained in Thai	535	4.01	.893
2) It is a good idea to give instructions (about exercises, activities and homework, etc.) in Thai if learners have a low proficiency level in English	535	4.00	1.068
3) A teacher who uses only English in class is less approachable than one who uses both Thai and English	535	3.75	1.171
4) Classroom atmosphere is likely to be more friendly if the teacher uses Thai at least sometimes.	535	4.10	.978
5) It is better to use Thai to keep discipline in the classroom.	535	3.41	1.118
6) Especially at schools, learners feel less anxious in a classroom where Thai is allowed.	535	4.07	.954
7) At least some Thai is necessary for teaching English to lower-level students at schools.	535	4.20	.864
8) Translating English words into Thai is a good way to remember vocabulary in English.	535	4.13	.954
9) In the English classroom, translating most new vocabulary into Thai is the best option	535	4.22	.847
10) Comparing Thai and English grammar is a good way to understand English grammar.	535	3.91	.992
11) Comparing and contrasting Thai and English grammatical structures is an effective teaching technique.	535	3.85	.939
12) When teaching learners at school levels, it is best if the teacher explains English grammar rules in Thai.	535	4.03	.905
13) If learners have problems with understanding texts in English (in reading and listening), translating them into Thai is a good solution	535	4.10	.891
14) It is better for lower proficiency learners if their textbooks contain explanations in Thai.	535	3.99	.978
Average	535	3.98	.968

The findings presented in Table 1 revealed a slight difference of mean value for each item, however, the general pattern indicated participants having positive belief towards the L1 in the English classroom with an average mean of 3.98 out of 5. This indicates that Thai EFL students, in general, perceive the use of L1 (Thai) in English classrooms as useful for students, particularly for school students. Although the calculated means indicated participants agreeing to the most of items, their agreement on giving instructions for classroom activities using L1; L1 helping students to learn grammar, reading, and listening; better vocabulary acquisition; and reducing learning anxiety were marked as high. On the other hand, items that concern the improvement of students' discipline and teachers being more approachable when they use L1 in the classroom were marked as low. Altogether, it is worth noting that Thai EFL students believe that L1 should be used in the classroom.

Q2. What are the Forces Behind Their Beliefs?

This section presents some of the students' excerpts from open-ended questions on why the use of L1 in L2 classrooms is important. The result is presented in Table 2.

TABLE 2
Forces Behind Students' Belief of Use of L1 in English Classroom

	Students' excerpts
L1 should be used in English classroom	1) <i>Because the use of Thai can make students understand the content of teaching and understand what the teachers teach more than just English. (student 88)</i>
	2) <i>Students will not feel stress when they learn English. (student 102)</i>
	3) <i>I think if we study only in English, it might make some students feel bored in the classroom, especially those who are weak in English. So, I think sometimes Thai should be used in the English language classroom. (student 114)</i>
	4) <i>It can be difficult for students with poor English proficiency to understand English at one time or to have a greater use of English than Thai during the course of study. Therefore, both languages should be used equally in the beginning and then adjust according to their ability or development later. (student 232)</i>
	5) <i>It will make students understand vocabulary and grammar more because they can always translate words into Thai if they don't know it. (student 300)</i>
	6) <i>Using Thai in an English classroom might make students interested in learning English because they can easily understand it. Students don't want to learn English when they don't understand what the teacher speaks in the classroom (student 329)</i>
	Students' excerpts
L1 should not be used in English classroom	1) <i>I think teaching in English only will make students learn English quickly. But the teacher should explain each topic in a simple way to make students understand the lesson better. (student 24)</i>
	3) <i>Because the best way to learn English is to use it as much as you can. (student 92)</i>
	4) <i>English only because speaking only English allows students to practice listening and speaking skills. If we use it every day, we will be able to speak and understand the English language just like we understand Thai. (student 218)</i>
	5) <i>English only because of being able to hear a lot in the language you are learning will make you feel familiar with that environment, help you practice listening and speaking which will greatly improve the English language. (student 357)</i>

Discussion

This study looked into Thai EFL school students' perception of using L1 in English language classrooms and investigated the driving forces behind their beliefs on why L1 should/ should not be used in English language classrooms. In line with previous studies such as Almohaimeed and Almurshed (2018); Debrelil and Oyman (2016); Galali and Cinkara (2017); and Kim et al. (2017), the findings of this study revealed that Thai EFL school students perceive the use of L1 in English language classrooms as beneficial. Also, as noted by Bruen and Kelly (2017) and Saliu (2017), the participants of this study agree that the classroom environment is likely to become friendlier if teachers use L1 in English classrooms. Further, current participants also believe that learners feel less anxious, bored and stressed in the classroom where English language teachers speak their L1 (Thai). In addition, both quantitative and qualitative data revealed using L1 in English classrooms as an effective method to master grammar and vocabulary of the target language, the participants agree that translating grammar rules and vocabulary in their first language help them learn, understand and retain vocabulary and grammar of the target language better. However, a few participants supported Krashen (1981), where they pointed out that teaching students using only the target language in the classroom is an effective method since it may help them listen, speak and practice the target language more. The participants also highlighted some other benefits of using the target language as a medium of instruction in the classroom such as getting familiar with the

target language through greater exposure to it. The general but brief overview of how Thai EFL students' belief about using L1 in English language classrooms is presented in Figure 1.

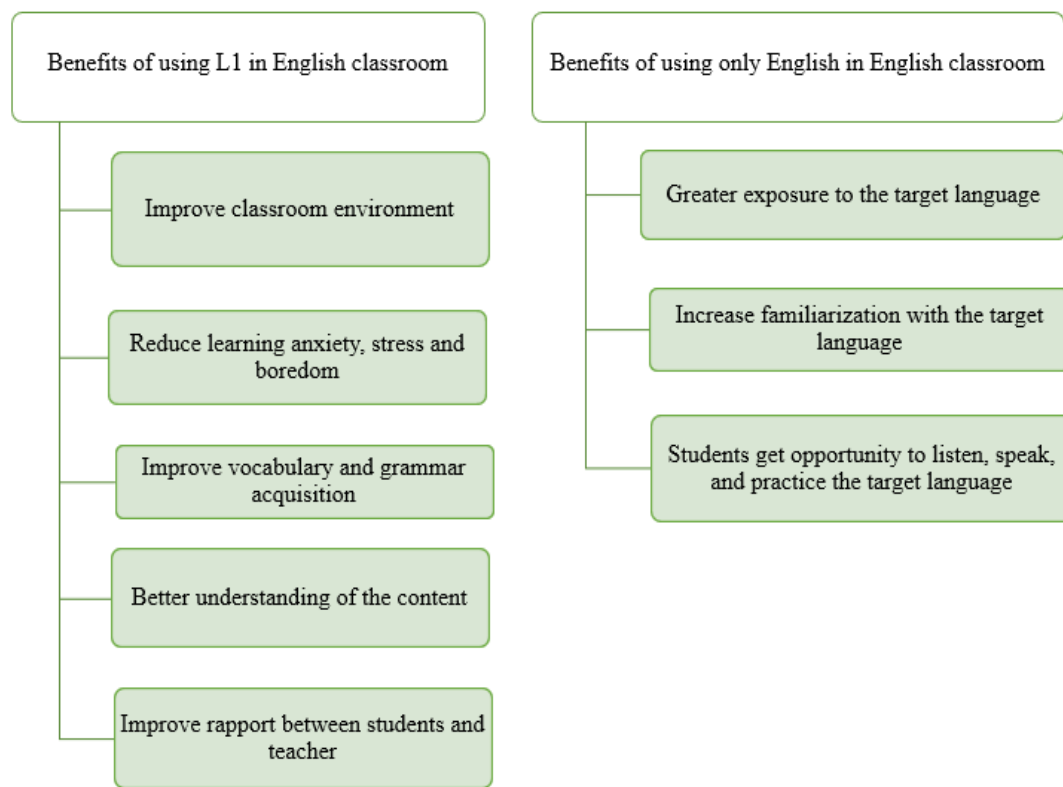


Figure 1. Overview of participants' belief in using L1 in English classroom.

Altogether, although this study provides no empirical evidence on how the use of L1 in English language classrooms benefits learners or not, the study has provided a theoretical basis of how Thai EFL students perceive using L1 while learning the English language. The findings of this study revealed that the use of L1 in English classrooms has several benefits for students learning when compared to using only English in the classroom. Some benefits included improving the classroom environment; reducing learning anxiety, stress, and boredom; improving vocabulary and grammar acquisition; better understanding of the content taught in the classroom, and having positive relationships between students and teachers. This indicates that the appropriate use of L1 in the classroom may have a positive impact on students' language learning. However, De la Campa and Nassaji (2009) and Çelik and Aydın (2018) have noted that excessive use of L1 in L2 classes impedes students' opportunity to hear the target language. Therefore, EFL teachers are recommended to use L1 in the classroom judiciously and not to overuse it (Manara, 2007).

Conclusion

This study found that Thai EFL school students perceive L1 use in English classrooms as beneficial if used judiciously. As noted earlier, the finding was consistent with many other previous studies where L1 usage in English classrooms was found beneficial. Most importantly, not only students, L1 usage in EFL classrooms is perceived as useful even by teachers (Sevim & Turhanli; 2019; Turhanli, 2018). With these shreds of evidence, it might be safe to recommend EFL teachers to use L1 in English classrooms, when necessary, especially with lower-level students. However, it should be always kept in mind that L1 should

not be overused rather we recommend using L1 only when explaining complex content of the lesson, eliciting answers from the students, explaining meanings of difficult words, and giving responses to the students when they lack necessary skills in the target language.

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