

**Perceptions of College Students on L1 Use with Different Levels  
of English Proficiency on L1 Use in English Classrooms**  
การรับรู้ของนักศึกษาระดับบัณฑิตศึกษาที่มีความสามารถทางภาษาอังกฤษ  
ต่างกันต่อการใช้ภาษาที่หนึ่งในห้องเรียนภาษาอังกฤษ

ณปภัช ทองวิจิตร<sup>1</sup>  
Napapat Thongwichit  
อัจฉราวรรณ บุรีภักดิ์<sup>2</sup>  
Adcharawan Buripakdi

**บทคัดย่อ**

การวิจัยฉบับนี้เป็นการศึกษาการรับรู้ของนักศึกษาที่มีต่อการใช้ภาษาที่หนึ่ง (ภาษาไทย) ในห้องเรียนภาษาอังกฤษ โดยในการวิจัยครั้งนี้ได้ทำการศึกษาจากนักศึกษาที่มีระดับความสามารถทางภาษาอังกฤษต่างกันสามกลุ่ม คือ กลุ่มชั้นสูง กลุ่มปานกลาง และกลุ่มเริ่มต้น ซึ่งกำลังศึกษาอยู่ที่มหาวิทยาลัยของรัฐแห่งหนึ่งในภาคใต้ ตั้งแต่เดือนกรกฎาคมถึงสิงหาคม ในปี พ.ศ. 2555 โดยมีกลุ่มนักศึกษาผู้ให้สัมภาษณ์ จำนวน 12 คน ที่มีระดับความสามารถทางภาษาอังกฤษต่างกันจากสี่สาขาวิชา โดยผู้วิจัยสัมภาษณ์นักศึกษากลุ่มดังกล่าวแบบตัวต่อตัว ผลการศึกษาพบว่า นักศึกษาที่มีความสามารถทางภาษาอังกฤษทั้งสามระดับมีการรับรู้ถึงประโยชน์ของการใช้ภาษาที่หนึ่งในด้านของอารมณ์ ความเข้าใจ และการพัฒนาความสามารถทางภาษา ทั้งนี้ นักศึกษาที่จัดอยู่ในกลุ่มชั้นสูงมีการรับรู้ที่เป็นลบมากที่สุด โดยจะเห็นได้จากกลุ่มดังกล่าวขอการใช้ภาษาอังกฤษในห้องเรียนมากกว่าภาษาไทย อย่างไรก็ตาม นักศึกษาทั้งสามกลุ่มต่างก็มีความเห็นตรงกันว่า การใช้ภาษาที่หนึ่งอย่างเหมาะสมนั้นจะก่อให้เกิดประโยชน์มากกว่าเกิดผลที่เป็นลบต่อการเรียนรู้ภาษา

**คำสำคัญ:** ภาษาที่ 1 ความสามารถในการใช้ภาษาอังกฤษ การรับรู้ อารมณ์ ความเข้าใจ

มหบัณฑิต (การสอนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ) อาจารย์หลักสูตรภาษา การสื่อสารและธุรกิจ คณะศิลปศาสตร์ และวิทยาการจัดการ มหาวิทยาลัยสงขลานครินทร์ วิทยาเขตสุราษฎร์ธานี

<sup>1</sup>M.A. (Teaching English as a Foreign Language), Lectures, Languages Communication and Business Program, Faculty of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, Prince of Songkla University, Surat Thani Campus

ดร. สำนักวิชาศิลปศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยวลัยลักษณ์

<sup>2</sup>Ph.D. School of Liberal Arts, Walailak University

## Abstract

This study explored the students' perceptions in-depth, from three different levels of English proficiency: the advanced, the intermediate, and the beginning group, on the use of first language (L1) in an English classroom. The research was conducted at a government university in the southern region of Thailand during July and August in 2012. Twelve student participants with different English proficiency from four different majors were purposively selected and were interviewed separately. The result of the study proved that the participants with three levels of English proficiency recognized the advantage of using L1 to create a positive classroom climate to support emotional well-being, in comprehension and to enhance language proficiency. The advanced group appeared to hold the most negative perception because their preference of a classroom language was English. However, they are in accordance with the other two groups; that L1 use, if properly used, would provide benefits rather than have a detrimental impact on language learning.

**Keywords:** L1, English proficiency, perceptions, emotions, comprehension

## Introduction

To use or not to use the students' first language in a second language classroom seems to be an endless and controversial topic discussed in the field of second language learning. The current trend seems to lean towards reconsidering L1 as a supportive tool rather than a hindrance in language learning. The perception towards L1 seems to be positive whenever it is used based on a clear rationale (CELIK, 2008). It is even suggested that teachers do not have to feel guilty if they make a decision to use L1 based on pedagogical reasons (Halasa & Al-Manaseer, 2012). L1 has been recognized as one technique in teaching a second language and in one context, it may be used for cultural reasons. As Khresheh (2012) argued, L1 in the context of Saudi Arabian EFL classroom was regarded as an eclectic technique especially when students considered that there was no English equivalent for

their cultural expressions. L1 is believed to be a helpful tool in learning whenever it is pedagogically used and not overused (Anh, 2010).

This article is organized into four parts: theoretical framework, research methodology, result and discussion, and conclusion. The issue addressed in this article is the perception of the students from the three groups of English proficiency: beginning, intermediate and advanced, towards L1 use in English classrooms. The aim of the study is to provide a body of knowledge on the students' responses to L1 use based on their different levels of English proficiency. The result is useful for language teachers who are experiencing difficulty in making a decision on which language to be employed with their students.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Why L1 Use?**

Despite the resistance to L1 use for decades, currently there are many research studies that reconsider L1 use and reveal its advantages in language learning. As in Meyer's study (2008), L1 use was proved to assist lowering affective filters which are believed to be detrimental to the students' learning. This evidence suggested that one area in language learning that L1 may be creatively applied to was connected with emotions. Ocak et al. (2010) also found a result which was supportive to this claim; they added that students usually use their L1 when they are afraid of making mistakes which could be embarrassing to them.

Another scholarly support for L1 use is a claim about students' understanding, particularly the students with lower language proficiency. Machaal (2012) studied the use of Arabic (L1) in English classes and found that this practice was useful for beginning students as it worked well to assist the students' comprehension and learning. Saricoban (2010) studied in further detail and found that L1 was used to deal with difficult concepts, new words and to recheck the comprehension of the lesson learned from the teacher. Similarly, Mirza, Mahmud and Jabbar (2012) concluded that L1 use plays an important role when dealing with difficult grammar, talking about new words

and abstract ideas. Thus, in this regard, L1 acts as a tool to make the learning process easier for learners.

Furthermore, Damra and Qudah (2012) proposed that L1 use could raise students' awareness and knowledge of similarities and differences between their L1 and L2. When the students' awareness is raised, it may lead to more effective learning. To provide support to this statement, Horst et al. (2010) added that L1 is also believed to be a helpful tool to bridge the gap between the newly acquired knowledge and that which already existed in the learners. This attribute is essential for the learners to make satisfactory progress with their language proficiency. If the learners are unable to relate what they study to what they already know, it could be very difficult for them to achieve a goal in learning a language.

The above mentioned studies presented a picture of why the advantages of L1 use should be reconsidered and employed in the language classroom. The proper use of L1 seems to provide advantages rather than disadvantages to the language learners. The question is how the learners with different English proficiency perceive these benefits or how much they recognize this existent potential in L1 use. Therefore, the next topic presents a discussion on L1 use with different levels of English proficiency.

### **L1 use with different English proficiency**

Teachers who teach English in any country where English is not the students' first language undoubtedly are faced with a variety of languages. The situation is more challenging when the students and the teacher share the same mother tongue and they both are in the context where English is a foreign language. In this case, the mother tongue or the first language may unavoidably play an important role as the main language used in the classroom by both the teacher and the students. The point is that when L1 is employed, the students may either appreciate it or oppose it. Teachers may state that they use L1 based on good judgment and primarily for the students' learning benefit. However, what must be considered is whether the students with different levels of English proficiency agree with this rationale or are completely of a different view.

L1 use has become a debatable issue in the field of teaching a second language; whether it should be allowed or prohibited in the language classroom. Certainly the results are varied in different contexts. However, it has been demonstrated by many studies that using L1 judiciously provides some pedagogical advantages rather than disadvantages; for example, Cook (2001, p. 402) stated that if L1 is regarded as a resource for classrooms, it is able to assist both teachers and students in many ways: for teachers, it helps in conveying meaning, explaining grammar and organizing the class, while also being used in collaborative tasks and individual strategy use for students. Furthermore, the learning process between children and adults is different. It was proposed in Bley-Vroman's study (1990, as cited in Al-Nofaie, 2010, p. 67) that there are at least five differences between L1 acquisition by children and L2 learning by adults. First, the ability to naturally acquire the language disappears in adults. Second, when learning L2, adults rely on their L1, unlike children who do not have previous knowledge. Third, it is said that, for adults, the language input is limited as it is mostly found only in classrooms. In addition, adults do not have the social factors which children have. Last, adults have more cognitive abilities. Therefore, these differences make it impossible for adults to study a second language by imitating the method of children's language learning. Therefore, not to use L1 at all in language classrooms seems to be disadvantageous rather than advantageous.

There are some research studies showing that students with different English proficiency react differently to L1 use. Based on the study of NAZARY (2008), the beginners appear to be the most positive towards L1 use as it could be a tool to assist their learning. At the same time, the advanced group seems to show their understanding of advantages of L1 use in learning a second language. Therefore, this group also feels appreciative to the appropriate use of L1 in the language classroom rather than being opposed to it. Stapa and Majid (2006) conducted a study on the use of first language in limited English proficiency classes and finally found that using L1 among students with low English language proficiency assisted them in generating ideas, as

L1 is connected with their background knowledge. This finding, thus, strengthens the positive aspect of utilizing L1 in a language classroom with beginning students. This result is supported by a study of Khassawneh (2011) in Jordan, which explored the students' attitudes about using Arabic (L1) in the EFL classroom and discovered a similar result proving that the weaker students, compared to the others, appeared to be more positive towards L1 use. In addition, in a test to investigate the effectiveness of L1 use in teaching vocabulary with lower proficiency level students at the National University of Laos, the study found a supportive result to L1 use. The experimental group who studied words with L1 definitions and explanation outperformed the control group in which the teacher explained new words in L2. Latsanyphone and Bouangeune (2009) suggested their study on L1 use in teaching vocabulary to the lower proficiency group may be another support for the application of L1 in the language classroom. In contrast, there was evidence from Mahmoudi and Amirkhiz (2011) that the low-achieving students in Iran, as well as the high-achieving, agreed that L2 should be given priority in the language classroom. This study in Iran presented a contrasting result to the other two studies previously mentioned, which clearly supported the positive result of L1 use among beginners.

The importance of L1 use was variously recognized depending on students' level: more among beginners, less in the intermediate, and even less in the advanced group (Kim & Petraki, 2009, p. 72). Generally, students favored L1 use but this agreement declined with increasing L2 ability (Carson & Kashihara, 2012). As might be expected, it was revealed that the beginners' heavy reliance on L1 was greater than the advanced students (DiCamilla & Anton, 2012). At the same time, the study of NAZARY (2008) found the intermediate group held the most negative attitude towards L1 use in the classroom. The reason is that they are not the beginning students who may have no alternatives but mainly rely on their first language when they need help. At the same time, the intermediate students, unlike the advanced students, do not realize that L1 has advantages if used properly in the language

classroom. The intermediate group is slightly different as they are in between the beginning group and the advanced one. Similarly, Montazer (2009) investigated students' attitudes and revealed that some students feel negative towards L1 use, as they do not believe in its benefits on second language learning. Nevertheless, there are some studies showing a contrary opinion. Tang (2002) studied the attitudes of the intermediate group of students and found that a high percentage agreed with using L1 in their classroom as the majority of student participants believed that it helped them to understand difficult concepts. The result of Tang's study presented a different response from a group of students at an intermediate level for they hold positive attitudes rather than negative ones as NAZARY introduced in his study.

## **Research methodology**

### **Research approach**

The study was designed to use a qualitative approach to collect the data from the student participants. Qualitative research was chosen as it is a way to step into the participants' world and see the world from their viewpoint; ultimately, the result will contribute to the development of empirical knowledge (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 16). Thus, the issue of this study: to explore how each group of differing English proficiency perceives and responds to L1 use in an English classroom, can be addressed in depth upon qualitative data collection through detailed and comprehensive description.

### **Participants**

Twelve participants enrolled in their second, third and fourth year at a government university in the south of Thailand. The first year students were intentionally excluded for they had not yet experienced studying English at the tertiary level. They all were from four different fields of study: Languages, Communication and Business, Industrial Management, Information Technology Business, and Business Economics. Three student participants from each field were purposively selected based on their recent English grade. The student participants who got A, C and D grades were chosen to represent three groups

of English proficiency. Then, they were divided into three groups: the advanced level (four students who obtained A), the intermediate level (four who obtained C) and the beginners (four who obtained D). The participants were informed that they could withdraw from the interview process anytime they felt uncomfortable.

### **Instrument**

A semi-structured interview was employed to ask the students' opinion towards L1 use in a language classroom. This technique was selected as it helped the researcher to focus on task while interviewing and to learn the story of each participant. Simply put, it was a tool to collect the data that was impossible to get from the yes or no questions in the questionnaire. The interview questions were mainly developed based on the study of Ford (2009) and Kim and Petraki (2009) and modified to suit the context and the participants of the current study. Examples of the main questions used during the interview are as follows:

- a. How do you feel about your English in class: successful or not?  
And what would you say about your English ability?
- b. Do you expect that English class needs to use only English?  
Why?
- c. Which languages do you prefer to use in class: Thai or English?
- d. Do you believe that use of Thai could improve your English learning? Why?
- e. How do you feel when the teacher uses Thai to teach English and how do you respond to that class?

As stated earlier, this type of interview allowed the researcher to prepare structured questions while it was possible to ask other questions relevant to the objectives of the research. The interview process was conducted during July and August, 2012 on the university campus where they studied. Each interview lasted around 30 to 40 minutes.



## Results and discussion

The student participants were interviewed in their first language (Thai) to make certain that they could best express their opinions. The data then was transcribed and translated into English by the researcher. There were four emerging themes regarding the issue of L1 use based on the interview data as shown in table 1.

**Table 1** English Proficiency and Responses to L1 Use

Domains	English proficiency		
	Advanced	Intermediate	Beginning
1. Emotions	1	1	3
2. Comprehension	3	4	4
3. Language preferences	-	1	1
4. Language proficiency	1	3	1

According to table 1, the first theme mentioned by five participants in the data was emotions. Five participants mentioned that L1 was useful for creating a relaxing and a more welcoming atmosphere which was good for a learning environment. The number of the beginning students in this group appears to be the highest compared to the other two groups. This is in line with Ocak et al. (2010) arguing that L1 use can be used to lower affective filters and with Meyer's study (2008) which proposed that students use L1 because they do not want to make mistakes that could lead to embarrassment. Thus, L1 in this regard plays an essential role relating to emotions of the learners. Being relaxed and secure is what the learners want to feel in the language classroom particularly for the beginning learners. This result concurs

with the study of Machaal (2012) which concluded that L1 use is considered helpful for language learning especially among the beginners.

The second theme that emerged from the interview data was comprehension. The rate of agreement was high among the participants for they believed that L1 had a role in producing better comprehension. The number of those who expressed agreement is highest among the beginners and the intermediate group. Though the number is somewhat lower in the advanced group, this presented the joint opinion among the three different groups of language proficiency.

This means using L1 could help simplify the lesson and make it more accessible to the participants. The result supported the statement that says L1 is effective for clarifying difficult concepts, learning new words, and understanding abstract ideas (Mirza, Mahmud, & Jabbar, 2012; Saricoban, 2010). Thus, L1 use here proved its advantage on assisting with comprehension, which was recognized among each group of different language proficiency.

The next theme was language preferences. When asked which language was preferred in a language classroom, only two participants agreed that Thai was a preference. It should be noted that there were no participants from the advanced level who showed their preference to be L1. This is true according to Khassawneh's (2011) study that explored the students' attitudes about using L1 in the EFL classroom and discovered that the weaker students, compared to the others, appeared to be more positive towards L1 use. Moreover, this result supported the study of Kim and Petraki (2009, p. 72) stating that the recognition of L1 importance declined from the advanced group, and increased in the intermediate, and the beginning respectively.

The last theme was language proficiency. Five participants believed that L1 could be an assisting tool to improve their language proficiency better. The number in favor of L1 use was higher in the intermediate group when compared to the advanced and the beginning one. This number signified that the intermediate group held the most positive attitude towards and believed in using L1 for developing their language proficiency. This result was clearly

in contrast with the study of NAZARY (2008) which found the intermediate group was the one who held the most negative attitude about L1 use.

## Conclusion

The study results proved that a pedagogical use of L1 is possible for implementation by teachers in the context of Thailand or in similar classroom contexts. Even though the preference of L1 use declined ranging from the beginning to the advanced, the agreement on advantage of L1 use was found at every level of English proficiency. The result of this study clearly showed that all the student participants with different language proficiency (namely the advanced, the intermediate and the beginning) agreed on L1 use, for they believed in its potential regarding emotions, comprehension, and language proficiency. Based on all of the emerging themes, the research results yielded some implications for classroom teaching.

### Emotions

L1 is proved to be an assisting tool in creating a more welcoming and relaxing atmosphere in a language classroom as Ocaik et al. (2010) stated that L1 use could help lower affective filters. This is significant, as students tend to learn better in a relaxing environment. Hence, it is suggested that English teachers use Thai in English classrooms as a facilitating tool to enhance their students' language learning progress with more practical and accessible lessons.

### Comprehension

Besides emotions, L1 is considered helpful in clarifying difficult lessons and leading to better comprehension in learning. Teachers may use L1 in classrooms when introducing new words or discussing abstract ideas to students. Using L1 in this case will make a lesson clearer and more accessible to all learners as Mirza, Mahmud and Jabbar (2012) proposed that L1 use can be helpful for difficult grammar, new vocabulary and abstract ideas.

### Language proficiency

When learners feel relaxed and study with better comprehension, they are likely to make significant progress with their language learning. As presented

in the study's result, the participants believe that L1 use can help enhance their language proficiency. This is true according to Horst et al. (2010) who demonstrated that L1 can be used in bridging between the new knowledge and the existing knowledge of learners. Therefore, teachers can make use of students' mother tongue to benefit students' learning progress.

The judicious use of L1 seems to provide benefits rather than having a detrimental impact on language learning. Nevertheless, it should be used in a cautious way especially when teachers work with students with different English proficiency. Different language proficiency implies different needs. This is in accordance with Carson and Kashihara (2012) that the recognition of L1 importance is high among beginners but declines with the intermediate and the advanced. Thus, it is recommended that although the judicious use of L1 benefits language learning in some aspects, it is necessary that teachers use it carefully in different contexts.

### **Acknowledgements**

We offer our sincere appreciation to the peer readers for their constructive comments and suggestions. Our completion of this article could not have been accomplished without the support of our colleagues. We thank you them for their continued support and encouragement. Finally, we would like to express our gratitude to Mark J. Neale and Ruth F. Harris for their time to make certain that our paper is friendly to readers.

### **References**

- Al-Nofaie, H. (2010). The attitudes of teachers and students towards using Arabic in EFL classrooms in Saudi public schools – a case study. *Novitas-Royal*, 4(1), 64-95.
- Anh, K. (2010). Use of Vietnamese in English language teaching in Vietnam: attitudes of Vietnamese university teachers. *English Language Teaching*, 3(2), 119-128.
- Carson, E. & Kashihara, H. (2012). Using the L1 in the L2 classroom: the students speak. *The Language Teacher*, 36(4), 41-48.

- CELIK, S. (2008). Opening the door: an examination of mother tongue use in foreign language classrooms. *H.U. Journal of Education*, 34, 75-85.
- Cook, V. (2001). Using the first language in the classroom. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 57(3), 402-423.
- Corbin, J. & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Damra, H. & Qudah, M. (2012). The effect of using native language in grammar achievement and attitudes toward learning of basic stages EFL students in Jordan. *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, 3(1), 300-306.
- DiCamilla, F. & Anton, M. (2012). Functions of L1 in the collaborative interaction of beginning and advanced second language learners. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 22(2), 160-188.
- Ford, K. (2009). Principles and practices of L1/ L2 use in the Japanese university EFL classroom. *JALT Journal*, 31(1), 63-80.
- Halasa, N. & Al-Manaseer, M. (2012). The use of the first language in second language learning reconsidered. *College Student Journal*, 46(1), 71-81.
- Horst, M., White, J., & Bell, P. (2010). First and second language knowledge in the language classroom. *International Journal of Bilingualism*, 14(3), 331-349.
- Khassawneh, S. (2011). The attitudes of students towards using Arabic in EFL classrooms at Yarmouk University in Jordan. *European Journal of Social Sciences*, 21(4), 592-602.
- Khresheh, A. (2012). Exploring when and why to use Arabic in the Saudi Arabian EFL classroom: viewing L1 use as eclectic technique. *English Language Teaching*, 5(6), 78-88.
- Kim, Y. & Petraki, E. (2009). Students' and teachers' use of and attitudes to L1 in the EFL classroom. *Asian EFL Journal* 11(4), 58-89.
- Latsanyphone, S. & Bouangeune, S. (2009). Using L1 in teaching vocabulary to low English proficiency level students: a case study at the National University of Laos. *English Language Teaching*, 2(3), 186-193.

- Machaal, B. (2012). The Use of Arabic in English classes: a teaching support or a learning hindrance? *Arab World English Journal*, 3(2), 194-232.
- Mahmoudi, L & Amirkhiz, S. (2011). The use of Persian in the EFL classroom—the case of English teaching and learning at pre-university level in Iran. *English Language Teaching*, 4(1), 135-140.
- Meyor, H. (2008). The pedagogical implications of L1 use in the L2 classroom. *共愛学園前橋国際大学論集*, (8), 147-160.
- Mirza, G., Mahmud, K., & Jabbar, J. (2012). Use of other languages in English language teaching at tertiary level: a case study on Bangladesh. *English Language Teaching*, 5(9), 71-77.
- Montazer, M. (2009). The practical use of L1 in L2 acquisition: a tendency toward changing the Iranian university students' attitudes. *Journal of Linguistic Studies*, 2(1), 9-22.
- NAZARY, M. (2008). The role of L1 in L2 acquisition: attitudes of Iranian university students. *Novitas-ROYAL*, 2(2), 138-153.
- Ocak, G., Kuru, N., & Ozcalisan, H. (2010). As a classroom language, students' attitudes towards speaking Turkish in English prep classes. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences* 2, 661-665.
- Sarıçoban, A. (2010). Should native language be allowed in foreign language classes? *Egitim Arastirmalari-Eurasian Journal of Educational Research*, 38, 164-178.
- Stapa, S. & Majid, A. (2006). The use of first language in limited English proficiency classes: good, bad, or ugly? *Journal e-Bangi*, 1(1), 1-12.
- Tang, J. (2002). Using L1 in the English classroom. *English Teaching Forum*, 40(1), 36-43.