



WHAT'S THE MATTER? THE DILEMMA OF LANGUAGE CHOICE BETWEEN INDONESIAN AND ENGLISH IN EFL CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the use of the first language (L1), Indonesian, in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom has become a topic of increasing debate. This research explores the considerations that influence teachers' use of Indonesian as well as the difficulties encountered in its application. Adopting a qualitative case study design, the study involved five Indonesian EFL teachers in Malang who were deliberately selected based on their professional experience and the levels at which they teach. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations and were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings indicate that teachers deliberately incorporate Indonesian to support student comprehension, clarify instructional content, and enhance learners' confidence. However, challenges emerge when excessive reliance on Indonesian limits students' exposure to English and restricts the development of autonomous language skills. Teachers therefore must carefully balance the use of L1 and L2, ensuring that Indonesian functions as a facilitative tool rather than a substitute for English. The study underscores the importance of ongoing evaluation, teacher development, and supportive learning environments to enhance English proficiency while optimizing L1 use.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past century, the demand for acquiring and achieving proficiency in English has increased substantially, becoming critically important in today's global society, particularly within higher education. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, the incorporation of learners' native language is frequently observed during instruction. The use of the first language (L1) commonly occurs in countries where English is not a native language, including Indonesia. Among educators, practitioners, and researchers, the question of whether L1 should be used in foreign language instruction has been widely debated. Consequently, the role of the first language in foreign language classrooms remains a contentious issue.

Diverse perspectives exist regarding the potential influence of L1 on second language (L2) acquisition (Brown & Frazier, 2001). Krashen & Cook, (2001)

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argues that first language interference is one factor contributing to errors in second language learning. From the perspective of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory, learning a new language should mirror the natural process of acquiring one's first language (Cook, 2001). In other words, to enhance their English proficiency, learners must be actively and meaningfully engaged in using the target language.

Furthermore, previous studies have highlighted the potential drawbacks of using the first language (L1) in second language (L2) classrooms. Research indicates that excessive reliance on L1 may develop into a habitual practice for both teachers and learners throughout the instructional process. When classroom interaction consistently depends on L1, its use can become entrenched as a routine pedagogical behavior (Voicu, 2012). Moreover, the predominant use of L1 by teachers and students during English instruction may significantly reduce learners' exposure to the target language, thereby limiting opportunities for meaningful L2 input (Silvani & Tarjana, 2016).

Several researchers have argued that when used purposefully and in suitable situations, the first language (L1) can offer meaningful instructional advantages. Supporting this perspective, Awad et al., (2020); Clancy (2018); Erk (2017) maintain that a planned and regulated use of L1 in EFL classrooms can facilitate learners' language development and contribute to more efficient learning. Incorporating learners' first language during foreign language instruction may also assist teachers in conveying instructional content more effectively (Marsella, 2020). Consequently, the complete exclusion of students' L1 from second or foreign language instruction is not recommended, as its deliberate and well-planned integration may produce positive learning (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2013; Nation, 2003).

Furthermore, the use of L1 has been shown to be more time-efficient than relying solely on the target language for instructional delivery (Setyaningrum et al., 2022). Learners often achieve clearer understanding when complex concepts are explained through their first language rather than English. Similarly, (Turnbull & Arnett, 2002) argue that L1 use provides learners with more salient and cognitively accessible input, which enhances comprehension of the target language. Taken together, these findings suggest that the careful and purposeful use of learners' first language in language classrooms can support learning and improve comprehension.

To date, numerous studies have examined the role of the first language (L1) in foreign language instruction. (Sibarani, 2019) reported that the use of Indonesian in English classrooms serves beneficial purposes, particularly in facilitating clearer and more secure comprehension of complex concepts when explanations are provided in the learners' native language. Anggraini (2022) found that while learners expressed a preference for English-only instruction, they nevertheless recognized the practicality of using Bahasa Indonesia in EFL classrooms when its application is limited.

Similarly, Larasaty et al. (2021) observed that students rarely used English during classroom interaction, whereas teachers employed English more frequently. Their findings indicated that teachers used L1 in minimal proportions, while students' use of L1 tended to correspond with their English proficiency and usage. Nahdiah (2022) further demonstrated that both teachers and students perceived the use of mixed languages in the classroom as advantageous, emphasizing the importance of students' understanding of lesson explanations and the supportive role of the native language. In addition, Pratiwi et al. (2022) revealed that although lecturers in EFL classrooms preferred to use English as the primary medium of instruction, Indonesian was occasionally employed to clarify and emphasize key concepts, thereby enhancing students' comprehension of the instructional material.

Because consensus on this issue has yet to be reached, educators often rely on their own judgments, beliefs, and interpretations when deciding how to use

language in the classroom. This lack of agreement may result in inconsistent or inappropriate language choices during instruction. Moreover, clear guidelines for language selection in foreign language classrooms remain largely absent (Julianti et al., 2016). However, most previous studies primarily focus on the advantages and disadvantages of L1 use or learners' perceptions, few studies have specifically investigated the factors influencing teachers' use of L1 in EFL classrooms. Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by examining the sociolinguistic factors underlying teachers' use of L1 in EFL classrooms. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. What factors influence English teachers' use of Indonesian (L1) in EFL classrooms?
2. What challenges do English teachers encounter when using Indonesian (L1) in EFL classrooms?

METHODS

This research adopted a qualitative methodology through a case study design. A case study involves a detailed and systematic examination of a particular phenomenon, situation, or social unit situated within a specific context. Generally, a case is limited by both scope and duration and can be understood as "a phenomenon of some kind within a delimited context" (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Consistent with this framework, the current study employed an exploratory case study to investigate teachers' reasons for using Indonesian in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. The study aimed to determine context-sensitive strategies for overcoming the challenges faced by teachers and to improve the overall effectiveness of the teaching and learning process.

The study involved five non-native English teachers who were purposively selected from a pool of English educators in Malang. Participants were chosen based on their current teaching levels to ensure representation across different educational stages. All participants indicated that they favoured the use of their first language (L1) during English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction. The teachers were between 25 and 40 years old and possessed teaching experience ranging from 3 to 20 years. Of the five participants, three had approximately 3–4 years of experience, while the remaining two had between 12 and 18 years. All participants held academic qualifications in English language education.

The teachers typically instructed classes of 25–35 students. English lessons were conducted twice weekly at the junior and senior high school levels and once weekly at the primary level. Collectively, the participants were responsible for teaching across all educational stages, including elementary, junior high, and senior high school. In accordance with ethical research practices, participant confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms, and no identifying information was disclosed, as recommended by Brown & Frazier (2001). This measure was implemented to protect participants' rights and prevent potential adverse consequences. Informed consent forms were obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

TABLE 1 | Participants' Background Information

Pseudonyms	Age	Teaching Experience	School Level
Rini	25	3 years	Elementary School
Mawar	25	4 years	Junior High School
Aryo	25	3 years	Senior High School

Anton	40	18 years	Senior High School
Arista	33	12 years	Junior High School

This study was conducted between October and November 2025. The primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews and observation. A total of 10 classroom observation sessions were conducted across the five participants, with each session lasting approximately 60–90 minutes. Observations were guided by a structured observation checklist focusing on the frequency, context, and functions of L1 use during classroom interaction. Field notes were also taken to capture additional contextual details and classroom dynamics.

Then, each participant was interviewed individually, with sessions arranged at different times to provide flexibility and maintain participant comfort. This approach enabled the researcher to obtain detailed and in-depth information while allowing participants to express their perspectives freely.

Each interview was conducted via Zoom and lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes, depending on the depth of information required to address the research questions. Zoom was selected as the interview platform because it allows real-time, face-to-face interaction while overcoming geographical and time constraints, thereby increasing accessibility and participation. The interview process continued until data saturation was achieved, permitting an extended and adaptable timeframe based on participants' availability and willingness to participate. Interview schedules were determined according to participants' preferences, with the researcher accommodating their chosen times.

All interview sessions were audio recorded, and participants were free to communicate in the language they were most comfortable using. The interviews were conducted without rigid limitations, allowing for probing questions to obtain detailed and relevant information. Furthermore, classroom observations were carried out to investigate how frequently Indonesian was used during English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction.

Initially, the researcher selected teachers based on predetermined criteria. After obtaining consent, the researcher conducted multiple observations of English classes to examine the extent of first-language (L1) use in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. Following the observations, the researcher interviewed the teacher to gain deeper insight into the reasons for using the first language during instruction. The interview was audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

Data triangulation was applied by comparing findings from classroom observations and semi-structured interviews to enhance the credibility and validity of the results. This approach allowed the researcher to cross-check teachers' reported practices with their actual classroom behavior.

Creswell (2012) outlines the data analysis process as consisting of four main stages: data transcription, coding and theme development, thematic analysis, and data interpretation. Following data collection, the researcher carefully reviewed the recorded interviews, which were transcribed and translated into English. To ensure accuracy, participants were given the opportunity to review their interview recordings, and member checking was conducted to verify the accuracy of the translations.

Data saturation was considered achieved when no new themes or patterns emerged from the interviews and observations. Although the study involved five participants, each participant contributed rich and in-depth data through multiple observations and extended interviews, which is consistent with qualitative case

study standards emphasizing depth over sample size.

Next, the researcher systematically identified similarities and differences within the collected data. These patterns were then organized into themes and subthemes for further analysis. The identified themes and subthemes were then mapped onto the research questions to confirm their relevance to the objectives of the study. The data analysis was carried out in a careful and systematic manner. The subsequent subchapter provides a narrative description of the categories that emerged from the analysis.

TABLE 2 | Sample of Data Analysis

Data	Codes	Sub-themes	Theme
“At the elementary level, learners are still in the process of developing cognitive skills, including language acquisition	Cognitive development	Age and Proficiency Factors	Factors use L1
“The use of Indonesian in the EFL classroom may lead students to become too reliant on their first language, reducing their engagement with English...”	Native Language Comfort and English Acquisition	Overreliance in L1	Challenges use L1

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings from the data analysis are used to structure the discussion. The first section considers the factors motivating English teachers to use Indonesian in EFL classrooms, while the second section highlights the challenges they face when integrating Indonesian into instruction.

1. Factors Influencing English Teachers’ Use of Indonesian in EFL Classrooms

Rini, an English teacher at the elementary level, stated that students limited English proficiency was the main factor influencing her use of Indonesian during EFL instruction. As young learners are still developing their language abilities, she relies on Indonesian as a cognitive support to help learners grasp English concepts and to create a more conducive learning atmosphere. Consequently, Indonesian tends to be used more often than English in her classroom. This tendency is largely related to learners’ restricted vocabulary knowledge at the elementary level, which may prevent them from fully understanding classroom explanations. Vocabulary competence is essential for the development of reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills, as well as accurate pronunciation (Sintadewi et al., 2020).

The language choices are based on the following information:

At the elementary level, learners are still in the process of developing cognitive skills, including language acquisition. The use of Indonesian in EFL instruction can serve as a cognitive bridge that supports students’ comprehension of English concepts and facilitates more effective learning. (Rini)

A similar perspective was shared by Arista; she said that:

My decision to use Indonesian in the EFL classroom is influenced by students’ limited English proficiency, I rely on Indonesian to

make explanations and classroom instructions clearer so that students can fully grasp the lesson. I also relate students' existing knowledge to new English concepts, which helps create a smoother learning process and supports their overall learning. (Arista)

Several participating educators emphasized that students' English proficiency level is a key factor influencing teachers' choice to use the first language (L1) in the classroom. These perspectives are consistent with previous studies indicating that limited student proficiency often necessitates the use of L1 during instruction.

Findings from classroom observations also support this pattern. In beginner-level classes, Indonesian was used more frequently during explanation and instruction phases, whereas English was used more during greetings and simple interactions. This indicates that teachers adjusted their language use based on students' comprehension needs and task complexity.

Kaymakamoglu & Yiltanlilar (2019) reported that non-native English teachers frequently employed L1 when teaching learners at beginner and elementary proficiency levels. Similarly, Larasaty et al. (2021) found that students strongly supported teachers' use of L1 when explaining complex topics, such as grammar and unfamiliar vocabulary. The use of L1 in EFL classrooms has been shown to facilitate language acquisition and accelerate learning, as well as improve students' understanding of sentence structure and translation (Awad et al., 2020). Within this context, the use of Indonesian helps clarify explanations and classroom instructions, allowing students to better understand the learning material.

Observation data further revealed that teachers consistently switched to Indonesian when introducing complex grammar points or giving detailed task instructions, confirming the functional role of L1 as a clarification strategy rather than a default mode of communication.

Moreover, employing the first language (L1) connects learners' existing knowledge to newly introduced English concepts, which supports a more gradual learning transition and enhances the overall learning process. Another participant, Mawar, offered a slightly different perspective. She explained that:

Teachers can enhance students' confidence by using Indonesian intermittently in English instruction, providing a linguistic safety net. When students encounter difficulties in English, allowing them to clarify or express themselves in Indonesian reduces anxiety and encourages active participation in classroom activities. (Mawar)

The use of Indonesian during and outside English instruction was perceived to boost students' confidence. When students encounter difficulties in understanding English, the option to use Indonesian for clarification helps alleviate anxiety, increases comfort, and enables more active participation in classroom activities without feelings of overwhelm. This finding is reinforced by observational evidence showing that students were more responsive and willing to participate after teachers provided brief explanations in Indonesian, particularly during challenging tasks.

These findings are consistent with previous research. Masoumi Mayni and Paramasivam (2021) found that EFL teachers often employ learners' first language (L1) to establish a comfortable and supportive classroom atmosphere, which helps lower students' anxiety and promotes a sense of comfort. Similarly, Haryanto et al. (2016) found that learners feel more comfortable when teachers communicate in their first language, which facilitates comprehension and lesson engagement.

However, these findings contrast with those of Shabir (2017) who, in a study of 23 EFL teachers, reported a preference for maximizing second language (L2) use in the classroom, with L1 employed only as a last resort to support students.

Another common reason teachers use Indonesian in English lessons is to clarify instructions and prevent misunderstandings. Anton noted that the complexity of certain topics at the senior school level influences his decision to use Indonesian. He noted that certain advanced topics or grammatical points are often difficult for students to grasp, and the use of Indonesian helps clarify these concepts and supports a more thorough understanding of the material.

In a similar vein, Aryo emphasized:

In senior school EFL classrooms, I consider students' language proficiency and curriculum requirements when deciding whether to use Indonesian," he explained. "I strategically use Indonesian to address linguistic difficulties and cultural nuances while maintaining a focus on developing English skills. This strategy improves classroom interaction and understanding, contributes to students' overall language development, and helps prepare them for more advanced levels of English proficiency. (Aryo)

Participants indicated that the use of Indonesian to explain instructions during English lessons helps minimize misunderstandings. Complex topics and advanced grammatical concepts can be challenging for students; however, the use of their first language enhances clarity and promotes deeper comprehension of the material. Intermittent use of Indonesian during English instruction also provides a linguistic safety net for learners by alleviating anxiety when they encounter difficulties in the target language. This support allows students to seek clarification or express themselves in their native language, creating a more relaxed and comfortable learning environment and encouraging active classroom participation.

These results align with earlier studies showing that when learners experience difficulty using the second language (L2), communication with teachers becomes more effective through the use of the first language (L1) (Clancy, 2018). In this context, L1 serves as a key mediating tool in EFL classroom interactions. The first language can be effectively used to clarify instructions, request translations, explain grammatical concepts, assess comprehension, capture students' attention, and even incorporate humor (Nahdiah, 2022). Moreover, several studies Kaymakamoglu and Yiltanlilar, (2019); Paker and Karaağaç (2015); Sundari and Febriyanti (2021); Timuçin and Baytar (2015) support the justified use of L1 in EFL classrooms for multiple purposes, including saving instructional time, clarifying complex grammatical points, monitoring comprehension, and fostering positive development in the target language.

2. Challenges Faced by English Teachers When Using Indonesian (L1) in EFL Classrooms

Despite the various reasons for using the first language (L1) in EFL classrooms, teachers also encounter challenges when incorporating L1 into English instruction. Some participants reported an excessive reliance on the first language during the teaching and learning process.

There is a risk that students may become overly reliant on their native language, limiting full immersion in English. Teachers must carefully monitor L1 use to ensure it serves as a tool for clarification and comprehension rather than a crutch that impedes the development of English proficiency.” (Mawar)

“It is essential to use Indonesian strategically in the classroom to prevent it from becoming a distraction or hindrance to English engagement. Although L1 can enhance comprehension, students may become overly dependent on their native language. Maintaining a balance is crucial—using Indonesian when necessary while prioritizing the development of English proficiency.” (Aryo)

“Excessive reliance on students’ first language can hinder their progress toward English fluency. While it may be necessary to use Indonesian when addressing complex grammar or advanced topics, it is important to ensure that this does not overshadow the development of English language proficiency.” (Anton)

Teachers’ views on the challenges associated with the use of Indonesian in EFL instruction reveal a common concern regarding students’ excessive dependence on their first language. Mawar highlighted the need for ongoing supervision to ensure that Indonesian functions as a tool for clarification and does not hinder the development of English proficiency. Similarly, Aryo noted the challenge of maintaining an appropriate balance so that Indonesian does not become a distraction, underscoring the need to prioritize the development of students’ English proficiency. Anton further highlighted the risk that excessive reliance on the first language may hinder students’ progress toward English fluency, particularly when addressing complex grammatical structures or advanced topics.

This concern was also observed during classroom sessions, where some students consistently relied on Indonesian even when prompted to respond in English, indicating a tendency toward overdependence on L1.

Consistent with previous research, the present study found that while L1 use can be pedagogically beneficial, it may also lead to overdependence if not carefully managed (Awad et al., 2020). Moreover, excessive L1 use can limit opportunities for English exposure, thereby constraining students’ language development (Algazo, 2022).

Overall, these observations highlight the complex responsibilities teachers face in managing language use in the classroom. Addressing language dynamics requires a deliberate and strategic approach in which Indonesian is used judiciously to enhance comprehension without undermining the primary objective of developing students’ English proficiency. Maintaining this balance is essential for fostering an instructional environment that encourages active engagement with English while still providing necessary linguistic support.

Some participants also noted that the use of Indonesian in English instruction may lead students to avoid using English. Arista expressed this concern as follows:

I frequently notice that students are hesitant to engage actively in discussions conducted in English. Many of them tend to rely on Indonesian out of habit, even though they already possess adequate vocabulary and grammatical competence in English. (Arista)

This perspective was echoed by Rini, who noted that;

Some students hesitate to use English because they are afraid of making mistakes,” she explained. “As a result, they often produce sentences in Indonesian as well as in English. However, I consider this acceptable since their level of English proficiency is still at the beginner stage. (Rini)

Rini noted that her students were novice English learners who were still building confidence and fluency. At this stage, they often prefer to communicate in their first language, Indonesian, as it provides familiarity and a sense of security. Although the use of Indonesian enables students to communicate more precisely and with greater confidence, the use of English pushes them to take linguistic risks and move beyond their comfort zones. This finding is consistent with Yildiz and Yesilyurt (2016), who reported that the use of the first language (L1) can lower learners’ anxiety and strengthen teacher–student relationships, which in turn increases student engagement in classroom activities.

Both Arista and Rini observed that some students preferred to use Indonesian even when they possessed sufficient English vocabulary and grammatical knowledge. This reluctance to use English may stem from several factors, one of which is fear of making mistakes. Language learners, particularly at the novice level, may feel self-conscious about their linguistic abilities and worry about being evaluated or criticized by others. Such anxiety can reduce their motivation to participate fully in English interactions. As a result, students may feel more comfortable using Indonesian, a language in which they have greater proficiency and are less likely to make errors.

These findings align with recent studies indicating that students’ difficulties in speaking English are influenced by psychological factors such as fear of making mistakes, low motivation, shyness, anxiety, and reliance on the mother tongue (Maji et al., 2022)). In contrast, Anggrahini (2019) reported that some students intentionally avoid using their first language to maximize exposure to the target language and reduce dependence on L1.

Although the study involved five participants, data saturation was achieved as recurring themes consistently emerged across both interview and observation data, with no new patterns identified in later stages of data collection.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the use of Indonesian in EFL classrooms offers clear benefits for students’ comprehension and learning. However, excessive reliance on the first language may hinder the development of students’ independent English proficiency if it is not carefully managed. Educators therefore need to continuously assess students’ abilities to determine the appropriate level of L1 support and gradually reduce its use as learners’ English proficiency increases. Furthermore, psychological factors, particularly anxiety related to making mistakes, may restrict students’ willingness to participate in English, underscoring the importance of a supportive classroom atmosphere that builds learners’ confidence and motivation. Equipping teachers with practical strategies for incorporating the first language (L1) at varying proficiency levels, together with continuous professional training, can assist them in maximizing the instructional value of L1 use while sustaining a focus on long-term English development. This balanced perspective highlights the deliberate integration of L1 and the target language to ensure that learners receive

adequate support without undermining their overall language growth.

One limitation of this study is the absence of an examination of broader contextual factors, such as educational policies, curriculum frameworks, and institutional support systems, which may influence teachers' decisions regarding classroom language use. Future research should explore these factors in greater depth to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of language teaching practices in EFL classrooms.

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