USING THE LEARNERS' L1

When the learners' own language helps learning, when it gets in the way, and how to use it with purpose

AT A GLANCE

What it is	the planned use of learners' first language (L1), or another shared language, in English lessons
Where it applies	any class where the teacher and learners share a language: monolingual classes of any size, one-to-one and online lessons
Key message	English should be the main language of the lesson, but careful, purposeful use of the L1 can support learning, save time and build rapport
See also	the **Large Classes** and **ELT Approaches and CLT** handouts

THINK ABOUT

- Should a lesson be taught entirely in English? Why or why not?
- As a learner, did you expect your teachers to use only the language you were learning?
- What are the possible advantages and disadvantages of using the learners' L1?

From "English only" to purposeful use

For most of the 20th century, many approaches to language teaching, from the Direct Method to Audiolingualism and early Communicative Language Teaching, favoured a **monolingual principle**: the L1 should be avoided, so that learners get as much English as possible. In many schools, "English only" became a rule, and teachers who used the L1 often felt guilty about it.

Research and practice have since challenged this view. Most teachers around the world do use the L1, at least sometimes (Hall & Cook 2013), and many researchers now argue that it can support learning when it is used with a clear purpose (Cook 2001; Hall & Cook 2012; Kerr 2019). The question is no longer **whether** to use the L1, but **when, how and how much**.

Benefits and risks

Careful use of the L1 can…	Too much L1 can…
make meaning clear quickly, especially for abstract words or complex grammar	reduce the amount of English learners hear and use
save time on instructions and organisation, leaving more time for practice	make learners less willing to try to understand English
reduce anxiety, especially for lower-level learners	become a habit that is hard to break at higher levels

Careful use of the L1 can…	Too much L1 can…
help learners notice similarities and differences between languages	lead learners to translate word for word
build rapport and respect learners' identity	reduce opportunities to practise classroom English, e.g. asking for help

The main risk is reducing **exposure to English**. For many learners, the classroom is the only place they hear and use it, so the L1 should support English, not replace it (Turnbull 2001).

When can the L1 help?

Kerr (2019) and Hall & Cook (2012) group the purposes of L1 use into teaching and learning, organisation, and social interaction. The table suggests when the L1 can help, and when English is usually better.

Purpose	The L1 can help…	English is usually better…
Explaining language	for abstract meanings and complex grammar, especially at lower levels	for simple, concrete meanings that can be shown or demonstrated
Checking understanding	with a quick translation check of a difficult word or text	with concept questions and examples
Doing tasks	when learners plan or brainstorm ideas before speaking or writing in English	when the aim of the task is speaking or writing practice
Organising activities	for complex instructions, especially with low-level learners	for routine instructions that learners know well
Feedback	to explain why an error is wrong, or to discuss learning	for praise and short corrections
Asking for and giving help	when learners help each other understand	when learners can use classroom English (*What does … mean?*)
Building rapport	for personal remarks, jokes and showing understanding	for everyday greetings and small talk
Motivating and discipline	for serious conversations about behaviour or problems	for routine reminders and encouragement

Based on Hall & Cook (2012) and Kerr (2019)

The right balance depends on learners' level, age and needs. In general, the L1 is most useful at lower levels and should gradually decrease as learners' English improves.

Techniques and tools

Techniques

Technique	What it involves	Things to consider
Bilingual support	showing the L1 equivalent of new language, e.g. on the board or on vocabulary cards; asking learners to summarise a rule in the L1	useful for checking understanding; keep the focus on English

Technique	What it involves	Things to consider
Sandwiching	saying something in English, then in the L1, then in English again	helps comprehension, but learners may wait for the L1 version; use it for key points only
Translation activities	comparing a sentence in English and the L1; translating a short text and comparing versions; translating back into English	raises awareness of differences between languages (Kerr 2014)
AI comparison	learners ask an AI tool to explain a language point in their L1, then compare the answer with the coursebook explanation and discuss any differences	builds critical awareness of AI. Check the explanations yourself first
Mediation	explaining in one language what was said or written in the other, e.g. summarising an English text for an imaginary friend	a real-life skill included in the CEFR (Council of Europe 2020)
L1 breaks	short, agreed moments when learners can use the L1, e.g. to prepare a task or talk about difficulties	reduces pressure; set clear time limits

Adapted from Kerr (2014, 2019)

Tools

Tool	Examples	Use it for…
AI chat assistants	ChatGPT, Claude, etc.	asking for explanations of grammar or vocabulary in the L1; comparing how something is said in English and the L1; creating bilingual glossaries for a topic; getting example sentences at the right level
Online and AI translation	DeepL, Google Translate, etc.	checking meaning and comparing versions; discussing why a translation sounds unnatural or changes the meaning
Bilingual dictionaries	Cambridge bilingual dictionaries, WordReference, etc.	finding meanings with examples; encourage learners to check the examples, not just the first translation
Flashcard apps	Quizlet, Anki, etc.	learning vocabulary with L1 translations and English example sentences

Using AI tools wisely

AI tools can give clear explanations in the learners' L1, but they can also be wrong, give rules that are too simple, or produce unnatural English. Treat their answers as a starting point, not the final word. Ask learners to check explanations against their coursebook or a dictionary, and to compare the AI's examples with real texts. Agree when AI tools are useful, such as when preparing or reviewing, and when they are not, such as during a speaking task or a test. Remember that many tools have age limits and collect data: check your school's policy before asking learners to use them.

Purposeful L1 use in action

Here is how a teacher might use the L1 in a 60-minute lesson for A2 teenagers on **the present perfect for experiences**. Most of the lesson is in English; the L1 is used for specific reasons.

Stage	Language	What happens and why
Lead-in	**English**	Learners talk about places they would like to visit, using pictures. Simple, familiar language: no need for the L1.
Text	**English**	Learners read a short text about a traveller and answer gist questions.
Clarifying meaning	**English + L1**	The teacher uses a timeline and concept questions. Learners then compare the English sentence with the closest L1 equivalent and notice that their language uses a different tense. This prevents a common error.
Practice	**English**	Learners complete sentences and ask each other *Have you ever…?* questions.
Task preparation	**L1 allowed**	In pairs, learners plan a short survey. Using the L1 to brainstorm lets them focus on ideas; they write the questions in English.
Task	**English**	Learners carry out the survey in English.
Feedback	**English + L1**	The teacher praises in English, and briefly uses the L1 to explain one error that many learners made.

Making it work

Plan your L1 use

Decide in advance when the L1 will help and when it won't, just as you plan other aspects of the lesson.

Agree a policy with learners

Explain why English matters, and agree together when the L1 is acceptable, e.g. during preparation time but not during speaking tasks.

Teach classroom English

Give learners the English they need to manage the lesson: *Can you repeat that? What does … mean? How do you say … in English?*

Reduce L1 use as learners progress

Use the L1 more at lower levels and less at higher levels, and tell learners that this is the plan.

If you don't share the learners' L1

Learners can still use their L1 to help each other, and you can learn a few key words to build rapport. Show interest in their languages: it values their identity.

Common pitfalls

Pitfall	What to do instead
Banning the L1 completely.	Use it for clear purposes, and explain to learners when it helps.
Translating everything you say.	Use gestures, examples and demonstrations first; translate only when needed.
Using the L1 for routine instructions.	Teach learners the English for routine classroom language.
Letting the L1 take over speaking tasks.	Prepare learners with the language they need, and agree rules for each stage.
Feeling guilty about using the L1.	Focus on purpose: is the L1 helping learning or replacing English?

ONLINE CLASSES

Online, learners can easily use translation tools during lessons. Rather than banning them, agree when they are useful, e.g. for checking a word, and when they are not, e.g. during a speaking task. The chat can be a useful space for quick L1 clarifications without interrupting the lesson.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The question is not whether to use the L1, but when, how and how much.
- English should be the main language of the lesson; the L1 should support it, not replace it.
- The L1 can help with meaning, organisation, task preparation and rapport.
- Translation and mediation activities can be useful language practice in themselves.
- Plan L1 use, agree a policy with learners, and reduce it as their English improves.

WHERE NEXT

Large Classes routines and management in big monolingual classes

ELT Approaches and CLT how views on the L1 have changed

Conveying Meaning and Checking Understanding alternatives and complements to translation

Teaching Vocabulary translation as one way of conveying meaning

Further reading

Deller, S. & Rinvolucri, M. (2002). *Using the Mother Tongue*. Peaslake: Delta Publishing.

Hall, G. & Cook, G. (2012). Own-language use in language teaching and learning. *Language Teaching*, 45(3), 271–308.

Kerr, P. (2014). *Translation and Own-language Activities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kerr, P. (2019). *The Use of L1 in English Language Teaching*. Cambridge Papers in ELT. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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Council of Europe (2020). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Companion Volume*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

Hall, G. & Cook, G. (2013). *Own-language Use in ELT: Exploring Global Practices and Attitudes*. London: British Council.

Turnbull, M. (2001). There is a role for the L1 in second and foreign language teaching, but... *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 57(4), 531–540.