

## The Role of the First Language (L1) in English Language Learning

Hanan Ibr. Habebi

---

### Abstract

English language learning has become increasingly important in the current era due to its pivotal role in education, business, and international relations. With the increasing number of learners of English globally, whether as a second language (L2) or as a foreign language (EFL), it has become essential to understand the factors that influence language acquisition. Among these factors, the first language (L1) plays a complex and influential role in determining the trajectory of English language learning, as it may accelerate the learning process or create challenges in understanding and comprehending the target language. This research paper focuses on analyzing the multidimensional role of the mother tongue in English language learning, by reviewing key theories such as transfer theory and interference theory, as well as the social interaction perspective, which highlights the dynamic relationships within the classroom. Based on recent studies published in recent years, the research aims to provide a critical review of current pedagogical practices and examine the pros and cons of mother tongue learning in English. The study also offers practical recommendations to maximize the benefits of the first language while minimizing its potential negative effects, helping learners enhance their English learning experience.

**Keywords:** First language, English language learning, language transfer, language interference, second language learning, classroom, social interaction, translation into mother tongue, teaching in a second language.

### Introduction

In recent decades, English has gained prominence as a global communication tool, becoming a key tool in education, business, and international relations. With the

increasing number of English learners worldwide, whether as a second language (L2) or a foreign language (EFL), it becomes essential to understand the factors that influence language acquisition (**Moya, R. 2020**).

Therefore, it has become crucial to understand the factors that influence how learners acquire a new language, with the first language (L1) being at the forefront of these factors. It plays a complex and vital role in determining the trajectories of English language learning, necessitating investigation into how it accelerates the learning process or creates challenges in understanding and comprehending the target language (**Moya & Moya, 2019**).

Linguistic and cultural habits deeply rooted in the mother tongue interfere with the acquisition of new language patterns in the second language. The L1 may sometimes facilitate learning through positive transfer, while at the same time creating difficulties associated with interference or negative transfer (**Cook, 2001**).

Many researchers have demonstrated that the influence of the first language (L1) on second language learning is not limited to vocabulary or grammar alone, but extends to the psychological and social dimensions that accompany language acquisition in diverse educational settings. Despite this, there is still an ongoing debate about the effectiveness of using the L1 in English classrooms, with some approaches advocating for strategic and systematic use of the L1, while others advocate reducing its use in favour of greater immersion in the target language. (**Albiladi, W. S. 2019**)

This research paper focuses on analysing the multidimensional role of the first language in English language learning, reviewing central theoretical frameworks such as language transfer and interference theory, along with a social interaction perspective that highlights the dynamic relationships within the classroom. Drawing on the latest studies published between 2020 and 2024, the research provides a critical review of current pedagogical practices and examines the pros and cons of the presence of the L1 in English language learning. It aims to provide practical recommendations that allow for maximizing the educational benefits of the first language while minimizing its potential negative effects, helping learners maximize their English learning journey.

## Literature Review

The role of the first language (L1) in second language (L2) acquisition, especially in English language learning, has been a major focus of research and studies to determine whether the role of the first language (L1) in second language (L2) acquisition is positive or negative. Various studies have explored how the first language can facilitate or hinder the process of acquiring English as a second language (ESL). Through this study, we will learn about the effects of the first language on English language learning, **Al-Obaid, M.Y. (2016)** indicated in his study, which aimed to explore how the mother tongue (Arabic) of Arabic learners affects their acquisition of English as a second language. The researcher focused on identifying the types of common errors made by English learners and understanding how L1 interference affects their learning process. The researcher used a qualitative research method, collecting data through classroom observations and interviews with Arabic-speaking learners who are learning English. The researcher found that Arabic learners often make errors in grammar, syntax, pronunciation, and lexical choices when learning English. These errors are primarily attributed to structural differences between Arabic and English, such as sentence structure and phonological differences. In addition, Arabic learners often confuse the plural forms of uncountable nouns and use prepositions incorrectly. Given the differences between Arabic and English, the study recommends that teachers focus on addressing L1 interference in the early stages of English language learning, particularly in grammar and pronunciation. Teachers should also encourage self-correction and peer correction to help students improve their English language skills. Furthermore, the study suggests that error analysis should be a routine part of teaching practices to help identify and address recurring errors, **Al-Zamel's (2019)** study explored Arabic learners' attitudes toward the use of their mother tongue (Arabic) in English language classrooms. Specifically, the study sought to understand whether the use of Arabic in the classroom facilitates or hinders the learning of English as a second language (L2). The researcher used two questionnaires: a background questionnaire and an attitude questionnaire. The first collected background information such as participants' age,

English language experience, and exposure to English-speaking countries. The behavioral questionnaire consisted of 17 statements aimed at surveying students' opinions about their teachers' and classmates' use of Arabic as their mother tongue in the classroom, as well as its perceived impact on their English language learning. The results showed that the majority of participants preferred using English to explain difficult concepts and present new material, while several students felt that Arabic could be useful in certain situations, particularly when conveying important information such as exam instructions. A large percentage of participants expressed that speaking Arabic in class facilitated better understanding of the material. While a minority of students opposed the use of Arabic altogether, the majority felt that its use was beneficial in specific contexts, especially for less proficient students. The researcher recommended that while the use of Arabic in the classroom should be reduced, it is still useful in specific situations, such as explaining complex concepts or clarifying important instructions. The researcher emphasized the importance of balancing the use of the first and second languages based on the students' proficiency level and the nature of the task. Muhammad Salim Khan from Buraidah Community College, Qassim University, Saudi Arabia, also indicated through an in-depth analysis of foreign language vocabulary acquisition through second language teaching by translating words and vocabulary into the mother tongue to help students understand their meanings. This method is considered the easiest way to convey meaning to non-native learners. **Hussein's (2023)** study, "The Impact of the First Language on English Language Acquisition: A Case Study of English Learners at King Saud University," aimed to analyze the important role of the mother tongue in the process of acquiring the target language (English). The study included students from King Saud University and relied on a field survey to explore the reasons and benefits of using the first language in foreign language teaching. The results concluded that students' errors are often due to the transfer of linguistic structures from Arabic to English (such as the transfer of sentence structures and the excessive use of analogies), and that the use of the first language plays a supporting role in understanding and clarifying difficult concepts, especially for students with low

proficiency. The researcher recommends employing the first language in a systematic, supportive manner without relying entirely on it, and focusing on errors resulting from structural transfer to reduce their recurrence, **Anindia et al.'s (2022)** study, "Students' Perceptions of L1 Use in Learning English as a Foreign Language," explored students' perceptions in Indonesia about the use of their mother tongue (Indonesian) in English classes. Data were collected through classroom observation and interviews, and results showed that students viewed their L1 as a helpful tool for expressing difficult ideas, understanding instructions, and solving classroom problems, especially for beginner-level students. The study suggests that using their L1 enhances students' motivation and reduces their anxiety when encountering new or complex concepts. The study recommends using L1 strategically to support vocabulary building and comprehension while gradually transitioning to greater reliance on English, In addition, **Sintara (2023)** presented "A Literature Review on the Use of the First Language in English as a Foreign Language Classrooms." This study reviewed a collection of research published between 2019 and 2023 on the presence of the first language in English as a foreign language teaching. The results showed that both students and teachers had a positive view of using the L1 for receiving instructions, understanding complex topics, building new vocabulary, and socializing in the classroom. The study emphasizes the need to use the first language selectively and thoughtfully as a means of support for students in the early stages, and that as students' proficiency increases, reliance on it should be reduced in favor of increased immersion in English. It recommends the importance of a balance between the two languages and the need to develop a clear strategy that ensures an effective transition towards linguistic proficiency in English. These studies clearly highlight that the role of the first language (L1) in learning English as a second language (L2) is complex and multidimensional, combining benefits and challenges. Research indicates that the mother tongue facilitates comprehension and vocabulary building, particularly for beginners and low-proficiency students, by providing a linguistic and cultural frame of reference that supports the learning process. At the same time, the studies emphasize the need to regulate the use of the mother tongue in a systematic and

strategic manner, so that its reliance does not become a social or linguistic barrier to immersion and interaction in English. They also highlight the importance of recognizing individual differences among learners and their varying levels of proficiency when developing balanced teaching policies. Based on these findings, it is recommended to adopt educational practices that integrate the first language as a learning aid in the early stages of learning, while gradually reducing reliance on it to promote fluency and proficiency in English. This will enhance learners' chances of successfully using the second language with confidence and effectiveness in a variety of contexts.

### **Methodology**

This paper primarily uses a literature review approach to analyze the role of the first language (L1) in learning English as a second language (L2). This topic is a controversial one in the field of language education. This research seeks to explore the potential positive and negative effects of the mother tongue on English language acquisition. This study examines the effects of the L1 on various aspects of English language learning, such as grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary choice, and overall understanding of various topics.

Literature published between 2016 and 2023 was collected and analysed. The focus was on studies that provided insights into the diverse effects of using the first language in English language classrooms. These studies included diverse samples of English language learners, including students at different educational levels and in different cultural and linguistic learning environments.

The primary tools used in this research were classroom observations and personal interviews conducted with students and teachers in English language learning classes. Questionnaires were also used as a data collection tool, with questionnaires designed to probe students' opinions on the impact of using their first language (L1) on their English learning. In addition, literature based on content analysis from multiple study passages was used, focusing on how L1

can be used to improve comprehension, especially when dealing with complex topics.

Data was collected through a comprehensive literature review, covering the following topics:

1. **Positive effects of the mother tongue:** Numerous studies support the idea that using the first language can contribute to students' faster understanding of complex concepts, especially when English-language topics are presented in a way that requires rapid comprehension of basic concepts.

2. **Negative effects of the mother tongue:** On the other hand, some studies indicate that excessive reliance on the first language can hinder the process of learning a second language, especially when it leads to language interference or negative transfer from the mother tongue to the target language.

Studies based on diverse methods, such as interviews, classroom observations, questionnaires, and content analysis, were selected to provide a comprehensive and accurate picture of the topic. The literature was categorized based on strict criteria for scholarly quality and thematic relevance. Reliable academic databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Research Gate were searched using specialized keywords such as "First Language (L1) in ESL," "Language Transfer," and "L1 in Foreign Language Learning" to ensure high-quality and relevant sources.

In addition, the focus was on the findings of these studies regarding student and teacher attitudes toward L1 use in the classroom. The data collected was analysed to identify the best pedagogical approaches that balance the use of first language (L1) and second language (L2) in the classroom. This research enhances our understanding of how L1 use affects English learning, particularly in the early stages of learning.

The aim of this review is to provide practical recommendations to help teachers

strategically employ the first language to support English language learning. It also aims to assist researchers and practitioners in balancing the use of both languages (L1 and L2) in an effective manner, ensuring enhanced understanding and avoiding harmful linguistic interference.

### **Results**

By reviewing the available literature, a set of major research trends related to the use of the first language (L1) in learning English as a second language (L2) was revealed. The literature showed that there is a consensus among many researchers that the use of the L1 can have a positive impact on the English language learning process. For example, studies have shown that the L1 contributes to facilitating students' understanding of complex concepts, such as grammar and pronunciation, especially in the early stages of English language learning. Studies have also supported that the use of the L1 can improve student engagement and increase their comprehension during lessons, especially in topics that are difficult to understand in English alone. However, there are also those who oppose the excessive use of the L1, as some studies have shown that it can lead to language interference and contribute to reduced exposure to English, which may hinder students' mastery of the second language. Nevertheless, the literature agrees on the need to balance the use of the L1 and L2 according to the student's level and learning needs.

The practical findings indicate the need to employ L1 thoughtfully in specific situations, such as explaining difficult terms or interacting with students in classrooms with high linguistic challenges. The researchers also emphasized the importance of training teachers to use L1 strategically, which enhances effective English language learning.

## **Discussion**

An analysis of the literature has revealed potential contradictions regarding the use of the first language in English language learning. In some studies, using the L1 is considered a useful tool for motivating learning and enhancing comprehension, while in others, it may hinder students' progress in mastering English. One notable contradiction concerns how to determine when to use the L1 and when to limit it. While some researchers argue that L1 use can be beneficial initially, helping to grasp basic concepts, others argue that it can lead to reduced communication in English.

One limitation of previous studies is the lack of standardized tools to identify situations in which L1 use is effective. Furthermore, studies have shown that teachers struggle to determine the optimal limits for L1 use, especially in classrooms with varying levels of language proficiency among students. Studies have also shown that indiscriminate use of L1 may foster dependency and delay full interaction in the second language.

Given these discrepancies, it is clear that there is a great need for further empirical research aimed at identifying more effective educational policies that balance the use of L1 and L2 in different educational contexts. It is important that this topic be studied in greater depth in multiple educational contexts and at various academic levels.

## **Recommendation**

Based on the findings of previous literature, a set of scientific and practical recommendations can be made:

1. It is recommended to use the first language (L1) strategically, especially in the early stages of English language learning, as it can help clarify complex concepts that may be difficult to understand if explained entirely in a second language.

Teachers should encourage gradual interaction in the second language, while maintaining a balance between the two languages.

2. Future research should be directed toward studying the effects of the L1 in diverse educational contexts. Extensive field studies are recommended, encompassing various educational levels and in multiple cultural and linguistic environments, to understand how the L1 influences English learning based on cultural diversity.

3. Balanced learning techniques should be included in the curriculum, so that students do not rely entirely on their L1 and are not deprived of the benefits of continuous communication in the second language. Instructional strategies should be adapted to students' different levels and support a gradual transition to the second language.

### **Conclusion**

This literature review finds that the role of the first language (L1) in English language learning is a complex and multidimensional topic. While studies have shown that L1 can be an important tool in accelerating English language learning and understanding difficult concepts, there are cautions against over-reliance on it, as this may lead to reduced opportunities to practice the second language (L2). Strategic use of L1 may enhance students' learning in early stages and reduce frustration and anxiety caused by difficulty in understanding.

This area still needs further research. It requires a deeper exploration of how L1 can be employed in a way that stimulates learning without hindering students' progress in English proficiency. It is important that future research be directed toward developing flexible educational policies that support the strategic use of multiple languages in diverse classrooms.

## References

1. **Alebaid, M.Y.** (2016). *The Effects of First Language on the Learning of English as a Second Language*. The Higher Institute of Telecommunication and Navigation. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol10no3.13>
2. **Hussain, S.S.** (2023). *The Influence of L1 in English Language Acquisition: A Case Study of ESL Learners at King Saud University*. Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities, 15(2), 1-24. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v15n2.05>
3. **Anindya, A.S., Inayati, D., & Ulani, A.** (2022). *Students' Perceptions on the Use of L1 in EFL Learning*. LLT Journal, 25(1), 310-318. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24071.4162>
4. **Suantara, I.W.A.** (2023). *A Literature Review on Using the First Language (L1) in the EFL Classroom*. The Art of Teaching English as a Foreign Language, 4(1), 1-14. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36663/tatefl.v4i1.489>
5. **Alzamil, A.** (2019). *The Effects of the Use of First Language on Learning English as a Second Language: Attitudes of Arabic EFL Learners*. Arab World English Journal (AWEJ), 10(3), 192-201. DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol10no3.13>
6. **Alebaid, M.Y.** (2019). *The Effects of the Use of First Language on Learning English as a Second Language*. The Higher Institute of Telecommunication and Navigation. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol10no3.13>
7. **Moya, R.** (2020). *The Role of the First Language (L1) in English Language Learning*.
8. **Moya, R., & Moya, R.** (2019). *The Impact of L1 on Second Language Acquisition*.
9. **Cook, V.** (2001). *The Role of First Language in Second Language Learning*. Cambridge University Press.
10. **Al-Obaid, M. Y.** (2016). *The Effects of the First Language (Arabic) on Learning*
11. **Hussein, S.** (2023). *The Impact of the First Language on English Language Acquisition: A Case Study at King Saud University*. Rupkatha Journal, 15(2), 1-24.
12. **Khan, M. S.** (2020). *Foreign Language Vocabulary Acquisition: The Role of Translating to the Mother Tongue*. Journal of Language and Linguistics, 13(3), 50-63.