

FIRST LANGUAGE (L1) USE IN THE EFL CLASSROOM: PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT

This study was aimed to find out the perceptions of teachers and of students about the use of their L1 (*Bahasa Indonesia*) in their EFL classroom in the teaching-learning processes. A quantitative method was used for this study which used a questionnaire as the instrument. This study was conducted at the MAN High School at Darussalam with 94 respondents, consisting of three teachers and ninety one students from grade two from the three different departments (XI IPS, XI IPA and XI IAG). The results from the questionnaires showed that the respondents predominantly used their L1 rather than the L2 in their English EFL Classes for teaching-learning activities such as when explaining materials which were hard to understand, giving instructions on materials and tasks to explaining new vocabulary and for helping students to feel more comfortable and more confident in learning English. In this regard, the use of their L1 in their English classes was aimed at having good communications between the teachers and their students and between students and students. In addition, the use of their L1 was very helpful for students to understand their English lessons and to improve the students' motivation in learning English EFL.

Keywords: *Perceptions of Teachers' and Students', L1 Use, EFL Classroom*

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INTRODUCTION

English has now become a global lingua franca and a means of international communication around the world (Brutt-Griffler, 2008). It enables people from different cultures and linguistic backgrounds to communicate and share their knowledge. Additionally, English plays an essential role as part of educational strategies in a great many countries (Graddol, 2006, p. 70). The latter describes the extensive, ongoing efforts many governments are applying to introduce English as early as possible into their educational systems, in an attempt to help their citizens to become effective users of this target language in the future.

The issue of using first language (L1) in teaching English has remained controversial up until now. Many studies have been carried out regarding this issue, either showing support or oppositions to the use of the L1 in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom.

In fact, the general assumption has prevailed that English, alone, should be used in the English classroom and this has prevailed for quite some time. According to Ellis (2008), the L1 does not have an essential role to play in EFL teaching and that too much use of the L1 might deprive learners of valuable input in the second language (L2) for the L1 can become a barrier to learning the L2.

However, another study done by Littlewood and Yu (2011) showed that the L1 was often used in teaching English in the classroom. In their study, they made a list of when the teachers used L1 in their teaching which might happen even outside the classroom, for example, when talking about personal matters with the students, where the use of English might cause difficulties, since the students were still learning English, they might have a hard time expressing themselves. This could lead to the situation becoming awkward because the students might not know the words to say what they actually wanted to say.

The results of a study conducted by Manara (2007) showed that although monolingual teaching was preferred in the classroom, there was still a place for the usage of the L1 in the classroom activities. Though the results were a bit different from those in the study by Littlewood and Yu, there were similarities, like in the usage of L1 in the classroom. Both studies mentioned the same example in which the teachers used L1 in explaining things that would otherwise cause a problem (inefficient teaching) if it was explained in L2 only, because

the things being explained was so complex. Manara (2007) found that the use of L1 would depend on the students' level of proficiency; meaning that L1 might be used if the students' level of proficiency was still low. On the other hand, as their level of proficiency grows higher, the amount of L1 that needs to be used should be lessened. The last finding was that their L1 would be used to bridge the students' L1 knowledge to their L2 learning.

Research Question

As mentioned above, this study aims to answer the following research question: *"What perceptions do the teachers and students have about the use of their L1 in the English classroom?"*

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical Background

The Classical Method, also referred to as the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM), dominated the English Language Teaching (ELT) profession during the 18th and 19th centuries (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). It mainly focused on reading and writing, as the second language only served scholastic and academic purposes. This approach was characterized by its heavy reliance on translation and explicit explanations of the rules of grammar. Consequently, the target language was minimally used as classroom communication was mainly through L1. The teachers usually used the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) which was part of their conventional teaching repertoire. This meant that the students were guided to write in Indonesian and then to translate their work into English (Nadia, 2016).

In addition, pronunciation was almost given no attention, whereas when it came to teaching vocabulary, it was mainly taught by providing bilingual lists of separate words (Brown, 2007). Specifically, Brown (2007, pp. 16-17) mentioned that "the vast popularity of this approach was due to the fact that few specialized skills are required on the part of teachers since tests of grammar rules and translations are easy to construct as well as are objectively scored." Despite its popularity, this school of teaching received tremendous criticism from a lot of researchers and linguists as it only focused on the written skills and totally ignored the spoken aspect of the target language (Brown, 2007). Learners were not exposed enough to the target language, which

consequently resulted in their inability to use their EFL L2 communicatively.

The Monolingual Approach

The monolingual approach, as proposed by Cook (2001), has proponents who support their claims in three organized ways namely:

- (a) the learning of an L2 should follow the manner of learning an L1, hence the L2 must be maximally exposed,
- (b) the separation and distinction of the L1 from the L2 create successful learning, as well as
- (c) the importance of the L2 through its continual use should be shown by the students.

These claims are seen as fundamental to the monolingual approach.

In regard to Cook's (2001) second point, supporters of the Monolingual Approach have stated that translating between L1 and L2 can be dangerous as it encourages the belief that there are 1 to 1 equivalents between the languages, which is not always the case (Pacek, 2003). They believe the two languages should be distinct and separate. Supporters of the Bilingual Approach might argue that to make the separation or distinction between L1 and L2, explanations in L1 are necessary, because the teaching of grammar is so complex, that without the use of their L1, there would be little or no comprehension on the students' part, especially at lower levels. This is not true according to others, who proclaim that actually quite a large number of grammar points can be taught in the target L2 language, especially through the use of physical or visual displays (Pachler & Field, 2001, p. 92). Concerning Cook's third point, it is considered likely that the use of L2 only in the classroom does help demonstrate the L2's importance and can portray the usage of the language being studied (Pachler & Field, 2001, p. 86).

Despite its proponents, the Monolingual Approach has its critics as well: Some of whom say that the exposure to the L2 language leading to learning while excluding the students' L1 for the sake of maximizing students' exposure to the L2 is, according to Auerbach, (1993), not necessarily productive and that exposure to the target language is to some extent contingent on the societally determined value attributed to the L1, which can be either reinforced or challenged inside the classroom. Therefore, the monolingual approach has been re-examined because the attempt to discredit it has focused on three points as Miles

(2004) has stated namely (i) due to its impracticality, (ii) the best teachers are not necessarily the native ones, and (iii) exposure itself is not adequate enough for learning.

Bilingual Approach

Ever since the monolingual approach has been questioned and re-examined, the movement promoting the use of the mother tongue (L1) in the language classroom has increased. Hence, the bilingual approach has emerged. Over the years, it has been accepted by researchers who agree that particular use of the L1 is a helpful procedure in the L2 classroom. In this sense, some researchers who are strong proponents of this approach see L1 as a potential source which can be applied in order to boost foreign language learning in the classroom. Macaro (2001), for example, argues that excluding the L1 is not only impractical, but it also has a strong possibility of withdrawing a crucial tool for learning the L2 language from the learners. In similar fashion, Aurbuch (1993) as cited in Sharma (2006) reasons that the mother tongue can give a positive role in the L2 classroom. In particular he also identifies the use of language analysis, class management, presenting grammar rules, giving instructions or prompts, explaining errors and checking for comprehension as possible roles for the L1.

In short, Harbord (1992) presents three reasons for using the L1 in the classroom which are summarized as follows, namely: (i) it helps facilitate communication, (ii) it facilitates teacher-student relationships, and (iii) it facilitates the teaching-learning of the L2. Furthermore, Cook (2001) has stated that in order to convey meaning and organize the class, teachers had better use the L1. For students, the L1 use can be beneficial for scaffolding (building up the basics, from which further learning can be processed) and for co-operative learning with their classmates (peer learning). Thus, it is obvious that the main reasons behind the practical use of L1 in the language classroom are probably due to time efficiency and easing of anxiety and confusion (Harbord, 1992; Miles, 2004).

Relevant Studies regarding the Use of L1 in EFL Classroom

References to teachers' use of the L1 in class along with different points of view and justifications that the teachers have had for using the L1 has been mentioned in a number of studies. In Canada, De La Campa and Nassaji (2009) conducted a study on German used as a foreign language to capture the moments in which the instructors used

the first language and assess the reasons for using the first language. To collect the data, both video and audio were used to record the respondents' activities. In their study, a number of reasons why the two instructors used English rather than German were listed. One of which was that the first language was used mostly when translating vocabulary and when checking the meaning of new words from German to English. The first language was also used when comparing the two languages. English was also more preferable than German for the classroom management, for giving instructions by the teachers and for interacting by both teachers and students.

Similarly, Al-Buraiki (2008) also investigated the attitudes of teachers towards the use of the first language in L2, English, classrooms. In her study, teachers revealed that the first language was mainly applied to give instructions and to explain new concepts and vocabulary. The majority of the teachers in this study showed agreement on the benefits of using their L1 which was used to facilitate the L2, English language learning and to improve the students' language proficiency. According to her, using the L1 saved time when trying to explain concepts that can easily be explained using the L1.

However, slightly different results were found in Krieger's (2005) study. He investigated the use of the first language amongst English language teachers in both ESL and EFL settings. The results of that study showed that using the L1 in a multilingual classroom meant that English was not a mere means of interaction in the classroom. Here, students used their L1 not only for facilitating the learning of English but also for their own needs. In the EFL setting the results showed that the students used their L1 regardless of their teachers' permission to do that or not. However, the researcher suggested that the teacher should try his best to help the students use their first language in order to improve their language learning and not withdraw them from the chance to learn English. The teachers should also set the rules from the beginning for when and how students can use their L1 and when they are not allowed to do so.

Students' opinions about the use of their L1 in their EFL classroom are also important, even though they have not been reported much in the past; in fact, most discussions have commonly been in connection with the teachers' opinions. This can be seen in the use of the Nepali language in Nepal's secondary schools which was studied by Sharma (2006). He observed the frequency of L1 use and the attitudes of the students and their teacher to the use of their L1. Sharma

(2006) pointed out that the teacher used Nepali to describe new vocabulary and concepts, to explain grammar rules and to give instructions for activities. While, students in explaining new vocabulary and grammar rules used Nepali, they used their L1 more than the teachers did for several reasons.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A quantitative study method was used since the purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of both teachers and students towards the use of their L1 in an English, EFL classroom.

The subjects for this research were 94 students from three different 2nd grade classes [year 11] at High School; The classes were XI IPA1 (science major), XI IPS1 (social major) and XI IAG (religious major) as well as 3 teachers who taught in three different 2nd grade classes at the MAN High School at Darussalam in Banda Aceh. Meanwhile, the object of this research focused on the perceptions of the students and of the teachers towards the use of their L1 in their English, EFL classes. In conducting this study, the researcher used a questionnaire which was distributed to the 94 students and the three teachers. Several parts of the questionnaire were adapted from Manara (2007) who inquired about perceptions of the amount of L1 used by teachers and students in an English, L2, classroom and the functions of using their L1. The questionnaires were filled out by the teachers and students. For practical reasons, the students were given an L1, translated version using *Bahasa Indonesia*, of the original questionnaire in the L2, English.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Research results

In order to find out the frequencies, percentages, and average scores from the questionnaires, a 4 point “Likert Scale” scoring system was used. This was aimed to discover the general perceptions of the L2, English teachers and students towards the use of their L1 in their English classrooms.

Table 1. The Four-point Likert-scale Used for Scoring the Questionnaires

No.	Attitudes	Symbol	Points
1	Strongly Agree	SA	4
2	Agree	A	3
3	Disagree	D	2
4	Strongly Disagree	SD	1

The Students' Opinions about Using their L1 in their English, EFL, Classrooms

The findings from the questionnaires filled in by the students regarding their perceptions of using their L1 in their English classrooms are shown in the figures that follow:

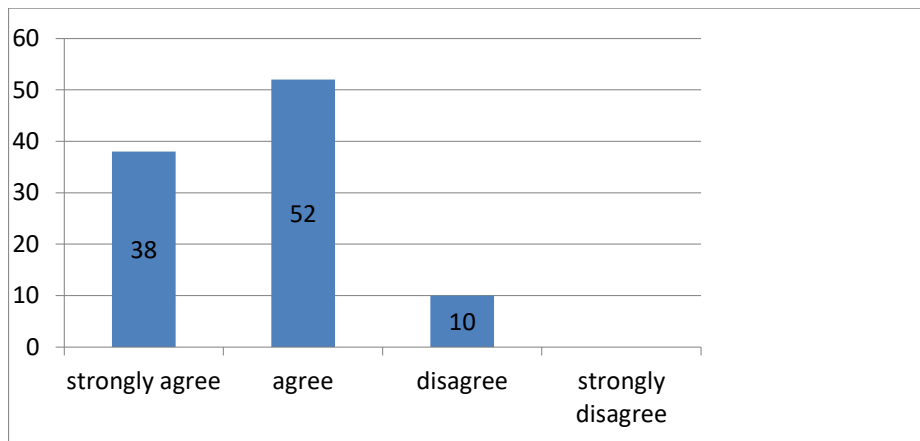


Figure 1. The Students' Opinion of L1 Used by Teachers for Giving Instructions

Figure 1 shows the students' overall opinion about using L1 in the classroom. From the total of 91 students participating in the study, 35 (39%) of the students strongly agreed with using their L1 to give instructions in their classrooms, 47 (52%) of them agreed, while the remaining 9 students (10%) disagreed. None of the respondents strongly disagreed. In other words, 90% of the students agreed with their teacher using L1 to give instructions in the classroom.

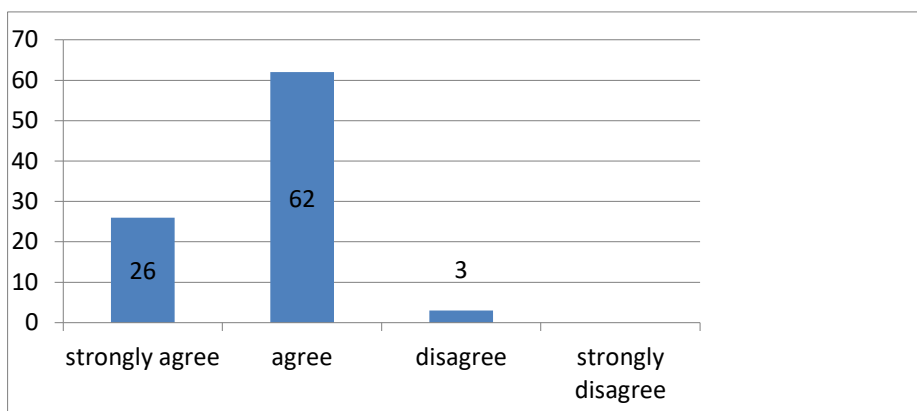


Figure 2. The Students' Opinion of L1 Used by Teachers for Giving Feedback

In the teaching-learning process, 97% of the students agreed or strongly agreed with their teacher using their L1 for giving feedback; 26 (29%) strongly agreed and 62 (68%) agreed while only 3 (3%) disagreed. In short, the students agreed to their teacher using their L1 to give them feed-back.

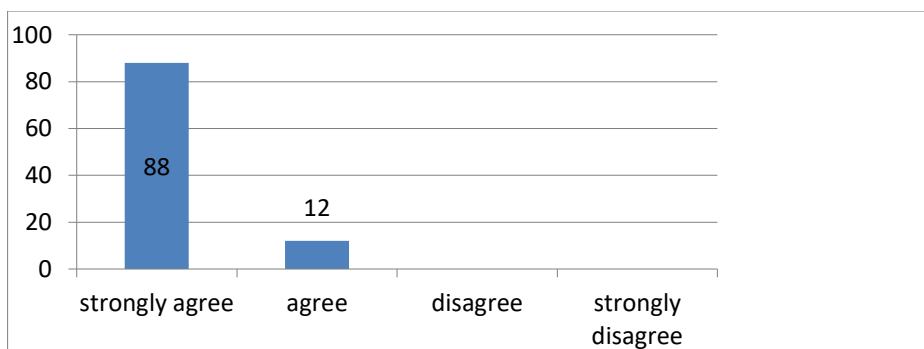


Figure 3. The Students' Opinion of L1 Used by Teachers for Checking Comprehension

Before starting each new lesson, the teachers usually checked the students' comprehension of the previous lesson using their L1. In this case, 80 (88%) of the students strongly agreed with the teacher using L1 and the remaining 11 (12%) agreed to it. This showed that the students found it easier to comprehend the reviewing process if their L1 was used for it.

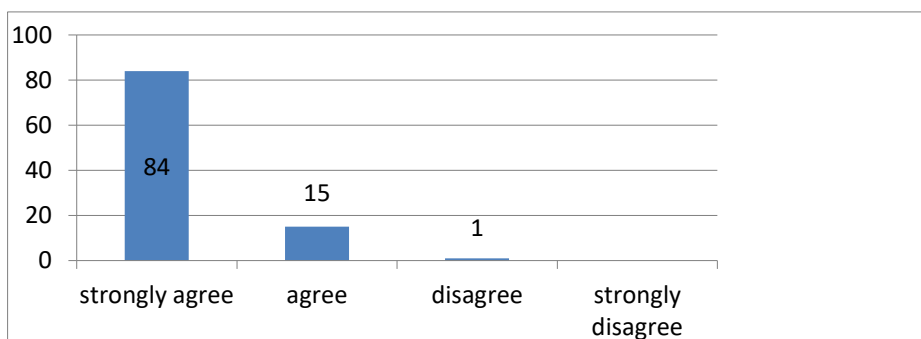


Figure 4. The Students' Opinion of L1 used by Teachers for Explaining New Vocabulary

As for the teachers' use of L1 for explaining the meanings of new words, 76 (84%) strongly agreed, 14 (15%) agreed and only 1 (1%) of the students disagreed with it.

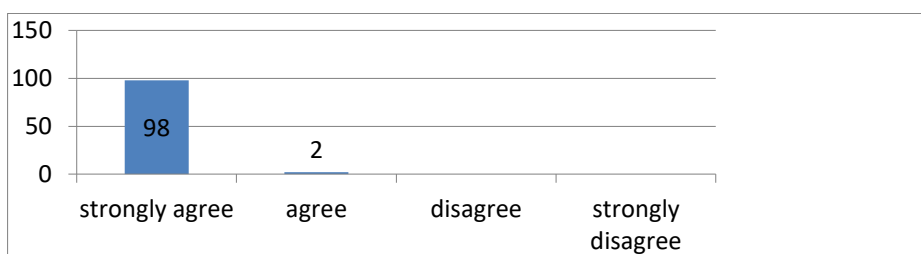


Figure 5. The Students' Opinion of L1 Used by Teachers for Explaining Grammar

The next item in the questionnaire was related to the use of L1 for explaining grammar as one of the important aspects when learning English. Therefore, to make it easier for the students to understand EFL grammar, their teachers usually used L1 for explaining it. From the questionnaire results, 89 (98%) of the students strongly agreed with this and the 2 others (2 %) also agreed.

The Teachers' Opinions about Using L1 in their English Classrooms

Data from the teacher questionnaire were also taken from the teachers who taught English in this school. Similar to the students, the data derived from the teachers regarding their opinions on the use and practice of L1 in their classrooms is shown in the charts that follow:

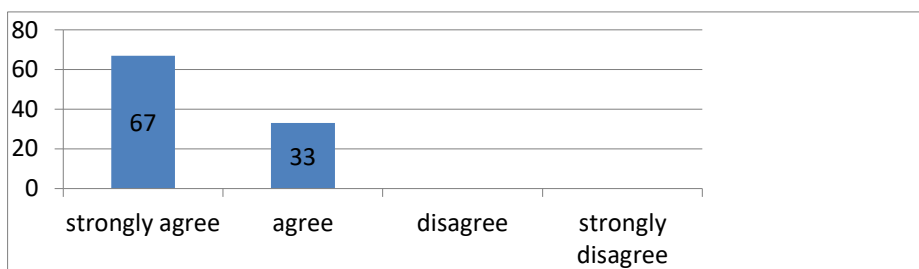


Figure 6. Teachers' Responses to L1 Use when Students Talk in Class to Their Teachers or Classmates

Figure 6 shows the teachers' responses to the use of L1 when students talked to their English teachers or when they communicated with their friends in their EFL classroom. From the total of 3 teachers, 2 (67%) of them strongly agreed and one (33%) of them agreed to it.

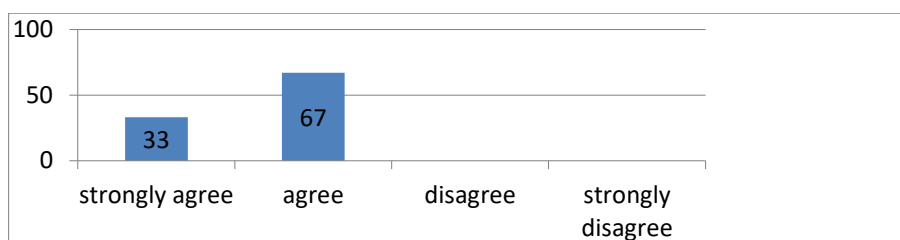


Figure 7. The Teachers' Responses of L2 Use All the Time

Item B on the teacher's questionnaire, asked for their opinion about whether they should use English all the time regardless of how much English that their students use. Figure 7 above shows that 1 (33%) of the teachers strongly agreed that the students should use English all the time in their English, EFL, classrooms while the other 2 (67%) agreed.

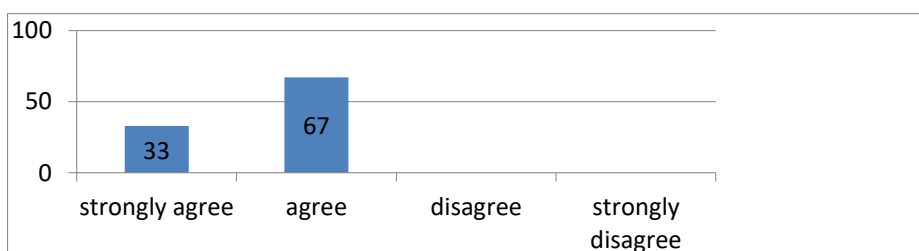


Figure 8. The Teachers' Responses to the Use of L1 in the Process of Acquiring English

Next the teachers' were asked whether using the L1 can slow down the process of acquiring English in the EFL classroom by the students. Here 1 (33%) teacher strongly agreed and 2 (67%) agreed with that opinion.

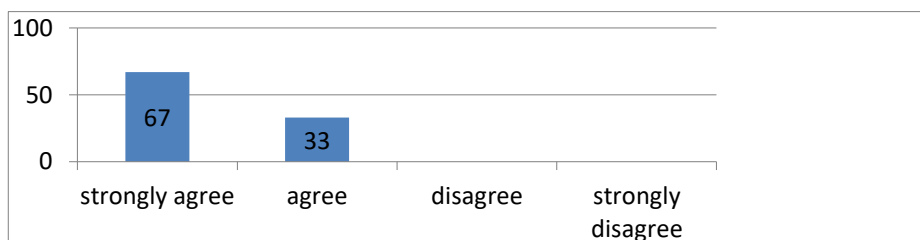


Figure 9. The Teachers' Responses to the Ongoing Use of the L1 in the Classroom

Next the teachers were asked about the use of L1 and its ongoing use in the teaching-learning processes: 2 (67%) teachers strongly agreed while the other 1 (33%) agreed with that.

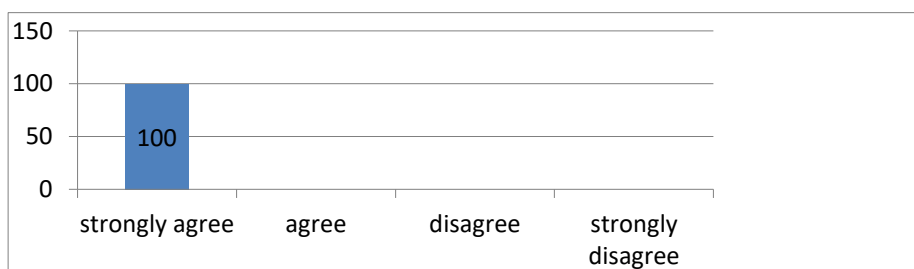


Figure 10. Responses to L1 Use for Comparing Students' L1 to Help Them Acquire L2

Item E, in the questionnaire was about comparing the students' mother tongue and English to help students acquire English: All 3 (100%) of the teachers surveyed strongly agreed that when they used the L1, mother tongue, in their classrooms to explain learning materials, the students will always expect them to use their L1 in the future.

Discussion

The findings showed that the respondents had positive attitudes towards the use of the L1 in their EFL classes at MAN Darussalam. The findings also indicated that L1 was commonly used in the EFL classes.

In regard to the attitudes to the use of L1 in the EFL classroom which showed positive findings, these results seem to be parallel with those from Manara's study (2007) in terms of L1 usage helping students to understand English better. The findings in her study suggested that if their teachers forced themselves to only use English, it might turn out to be inefficient in teaching as the students might misunderstand the teacher's explanations. This was also in accordance with the findings from the Brooks-Lewis' study (2009), which explained the learners' attitudes towards the use of L1 as "overwhelmingly positive" and in support of the combination rather than the elimination of the use of the L1.

Both teachers and students had the same opinions that L1 should be used as a facilitator when learning the L2 to get better understanding. The researcher also observed the extent of the L1 use in the teaching-learning activities in the classroom and he found that both teachers and students tended to use the L1 in their classroom activities like when explaining things which are hard to understand, making jokes, correcting mistakes and giving instructions. By using LI when explaining things, the students were better able to understand since they know what was meant in their LI. Jokes were also easier to understand in their LI since the jokes were told in words that the student could make sense of without worrying that they might not get the joke. When correcting mistakes using LI, the students found it easier to see the reason why something was wrong. It also made more sense when explained in LI because the difference could be shown, why it does not work in English using their LI. For giving instructions, the more complex the instruction, using LI will be better, so that the instructions can be clearly understood.

As for the dominant usage of L1 in the EFL classroom found at MAN Darussalam, Banda Aceh, this was similar to the results from the study done by Al-Buraiki (2008) who also investigated the teachers' attitudes towards the use of the L1 in English classrooms. In her study, the teachers revealed that the L1 was mainly applied to give instructions and to explain new concepts and vocabulary. The majority of the teachers in this study showed agreement with the benefits from using the L1 which was used to facilitate English language learning and improve students' language proficiency. According to them, using the L1 saved time when trying to explain concepts that can easily be explained through L1 translation.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Conclusions

The results from this study showed that both students and teachers had positive attitudes towards the use of their L1 (*Bahasa Indonesia*) in their EFL classrooms. The teachers and students surveyed showed that judicious use of their L1 was helpful and could play a significant role in facilitating learning English, EFL. However, too much use of the L1 might minimize students' exposure to the target language, English, and hence limit their opportunities to practice it. The study found that using their L1 could help the students in comprehending L2 in the classroom. In addition, students and teachers as respondents highlighted some learning occasions where the use of L1 might be beneficial, thus L1 seemed acceptable for introducing new vocabulary, explaining grammar, telling jokes and giving instructions.

Also, the study findings showed some inconsistencies between the students' views and those of their teachers in regard to using their L1 (*Bahasa Indonesia*) in particular learning situations. The EFL students, especially the less motivated ones believed that L1 was important in group work activities and in explaining things as this could help them clarify their understanding. On the other hand, their teachers did not share the same views. They considered pair/group work activities and explaining something as potential opportunities for their students to maximize their use of English.

Suggestions

Based on the information above, the use of their L1 can be a facilitator for understanding their L2 and the awareness of making EFL students proficient in their L2 should be increased by the teachers, especially for Senior High School students the majority of whom already have a basic knowledge of English. Thus, the teachers should ration the portion of L1 used by them in teaching English as eventually it will impact on the proficiency of their students in English. For other researchers, it is suggested that they conduct similar studies in different schools where English is used as a medium of instruction in order to explore more viewpoints concerning this issue.

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