

# Exploring Teachers' Attitude and Reason to Use Learners' Own Language in EFL Classroom

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## Abstract

*The main purpose of this study was to explore teachers' attitudes and reasons to use learners' own language in EFL classrooms. To meet this purpose, a descriptive case study design was employed. Dangila High School English language teachers and students in West Gojjam, Ethiopia, were involved in the study. To collect data, classroom observations, one-to-one in-depth interviews, and attitude questionnaires were administered. Both quantitative (SPSS 20 Software) and qualitative (Open Code 4 Software) were used to analyze the data. Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used to test the reliability of both teachers' and students' attitude questionnaires. The Cronbach's alpha test result was 0.847 and 0.766 confidence level, respectively. The finding indicates that teachers' attitude towards learners' own language use in EFL classrooms is a positive and important tool that could contribute a lot to students' success. The result also shows that own language use in EFL classrooms shows some important components that make it different from and useful over the existing approach of EFL teaching. English language teachers' reasons to use learners' own language in EFL classrooms are to clarify difficult concepts, motivate students, teach grammar rules, and teachers do have other learner-based pushing factors and reasons like: students cannot understand English, own language makes the lesson simple, students' weakness, and teachers' weakness.*

**Keywords:** Attitude, Reason, and Own language.

## Introduction

In the history of English language teaching, there has been a heated debate between scholars who follow an "intra-lingual strategy", (e.g., Nunan 1987, McDonald 1993, Sharma 2006, Swain 1985, Cook 2001 and Skehan 2001) that is, a monolingual approach which rejects first language use in EFL classroom, and a "cross-lingual strategy", (e.g. Atkinson 1987, 1993; Stern 1992, Auerbach 1993, Butzkamm 2009; Levine 2003 and Harmer, 2007); which allows reasonable use of learners' first language or mother tongue in EFL classroom. In the 18th century, the use of L1 in teaching a foreign language was widespread and it was most evident in Grammar Translation Methods.

However; in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was a shift away from written form to spoken form and the Berlitz Method marked the shift away from the cross-lingual strategy towards the intra-lingual strategy (Howatt, 1984). According to Howatt (1984), there are three main beliefs of FLT: (1) Foreign language teaching should be done exclusively in the foreign language;

(2) Translation between the mother tongue and foreign language should be avoided; and (3) in bilingual programs, the two languages should be kept separate. This tradition was so strong that it has dominated language teaching practices to date.

If one goes away from the season of methods, again, the history of language teaching is characterized by arguments, pro and con first language use in EFL classrooms. Some scholars advocate an intra-lingual strategy since they believe: (1) language is best learned when the language is used for real and meaningful communication (Nunan, 1987); (2) In EFL contexts, classroom is the only chance for students to use the target language in the classroom (McDonald, 1993); (3) It helps learners internalize grammar and get used to thinking in English through exposure (Sharma, 2006); (4) It helps learners to produce comprehensible output (Swain, 1985); (5) Any reduction of the L2 would then be seen as a wasted opportunity for valuable comprehensible input (Krashen, 1981); (6) It is in line with the naturalistic principle, that is, people can learn a second language in the same way as their first language (Cook, 2001); and (7) Negotiation of meaning between learners, learners, and teachers, is also seen as key to the second language acquisition process (Skehan, 2001). Their belief seems to ignore the concept of

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cross-lingual strategy or a reasonable use of learners' own language and its role as a tool in EFL classrooms. The difference between theory and practice; and conflicting ideas among scholars about own language use in EFL classrooms are another motivational factor to the researcher to conduct this study; because the issue to use or not to use own language or students' first language in EFL classrooms have made gradually more arguments among researchers and language teachers for many years.

**2. Some related empirical findings:** Although several studies in Ethiopia revealed that most teachers were in favor of using own language and considered it as a learning strategy and a facilitator (e.g., Dereje and Abiy, 2015; Cook and Hall 2013; Abiy and Mohamed, 2012; Kenenisa, 2003; Cohen 2000; Heugh and et.al, 2007 and Mekonnen, 2009), there are considerable gaps in identifying factors affecting teachers' attitude towards own language use in EFL classroom, describing teachers' reason for using learners' own language in EFL classroom, investigating how learners' own language is used in EFL classroom, and addressing teachers' reason for not using learners' own language in EFL classroom.

In the local context, many researchers have conducted researches on exploring the use of first language in EFL classrooms (e.g., Cohen, 2000; Dereje and Abiy, 2015; Heught and et.al, 2007; Kenenisa, 2003; Jemal, 2012 and Robsan Margo, 2015). Their findings showed that learners' own language was used in EFL classrooms for various functions and the attitudes of teachers about using learners' own language in EFL classrooms were also generally positive. Graham Hall and Guy Cook (2013) have conducted global surveys on this issue. Their major findings were that the vast majority of participant teachers reported using the learners' own language to explain when meanings in English are unclear, and to explain vocabulary and grammar when they considered it necessary. The research identified the role of own language use in developing rapport and a good classroom atmosphere. Coming to the local researches which have slight similarities with the current research is conducted by Mekonnen (2009), on "Implications of the use of mother tongue versus English as language of instruction for academic achievement in Ethiopia." He argued that the choice of an appropriate language of instruction is one of the most significant factors that contribute to the effectiveness of any education. Dereje Assefa and Abiy Yigzaw (2015) also have conducted related research entitled "Male and Female Secondary School EFL Teachers' Code-Switching to L1 in their Classes: their Attitudes, Reasons and Beliefs about the Functions of Code-Switching" The finding shows that the majority of male EFL teachers in this study had negative attitudes towards L1 use in the EFL classroom and did not acknowledge its benefits much. In contrast, the majority of female teachers had positive attitudes towards its use and acknowledged its advantages.

**3. The objective of the study:** the general objective of this study is to explore teachers' attitudes *and* reasons to use learners' own language in EFL classrooms.

#### 4. Research Questions:

1. What is teachers' attitude towards learners' own language use in EFL classrooms?
2. What are the reasons that teachers do use learners' own language in the EFL classrooms?
3. What are the reasons that teachers do not use learners' own language in EFL classrooms?

**5. Research setting:** The study was conducted in Dangila High School, West Gojjam, Ethiopia, and delimited in one government high school English language teachers in 2020.

**6. The History of ELT in Ethiopia:** When Ethiopia is in focus, until the early 1900s, formal education was limited to a system of religious instruction organized and presented under the support of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Church schools prepared individuals for clergy and for other religious duties and positions. In the process, these schools also provided religious education to the children of the nobility and to the sons of limited numbers of tenant farmers and servants associated with elite families. Misguided policies caused very few children to receive education. As a result, Ethiopia did not meet the educational standards of other African countries in the early 1900s (Wikipedia).

French was first taught as a foreign language by native teachers. During the Italian occupation, the Italian government had attempted to introduce its own education system and Italian was taught for a short period of time. Later on, after the Italians left the country in 1942, the British teachers started the school and English had come to the floor (Diribsa et al., 1999). The teaching of English as a foreign language in Ethiopian educational settings can be associated with the introduction of modern education in the country. In Ethiopia, modern education was introduced at the turn of the 20th century and it officially began with the opening of Menelik II School in Addis Ababa, after a long history of church education in the country (Ibid).

In Ethiopia, English language is being given as a distinctive discipline in all levels of schools and it is a medium of instruction in all secondary and tertiary levels. In addition to being a service language, it is the language for international trade, commerce, and communication. The researcher believes that greater consideration is not being given to English language teachers to qualify and make them efficient enough regarding English language teaching; particularly, the issues of the multilingual nature of the school community and own language use in EFL classrooms.

**7. Language Policies in Ethiopia:** The language policy of Ethiopia in the different regimes were different and seems to be progressive. The use of Amharic before Haile Silassie I was a 'de facto' language policy because there was no

written constitution or policy document. From Haile Silassie I, forward constitutions were written, although nothing was clearly stated regarding the language use policy. Similarly, the military government had tried to address the issue of linguistic equity and rights in the constitution more overtly than its predecessor.

Both the new constitution and the education policy of the country legally and clearly laid the equity of each vernacular language and the right to use each for education, administration, business, and communication. The current national constitution and education policy seems to have limitations and still fail to be complete and satisfactory to every ethnicity, which have manifested for better implementation and practicality. According to Kembo-Sure (2003: 252), good language policymakers should reflect the following considerations while making the policy: human rights implications for minorities, the economic utility of each language, national integration, government efficiency, and group identity as well as personal identity.

However, in most cases, as policies are made by politicians and politically committed experts, they fail to consider one or more of the above. For example, if we look at the existing Ethiopian language policy, it seems to have focused more on the human rights implications' but not well regarded the economic utility and the national integration issues the language policy might bear (Hirut, 2007).

Furthermore, such high-level political documents do not guarantee a clear understanding of what they actually mean in implementation. Therefore, institutions and activities such as language education, policy, language planning, language management, and their constituting elements (status planning, corpus planning, acquisition planning, etc.) are required down the way in the hierarchy of institutions and decision bodies (Heugh, et al., 2006). There remains much to be done in Ethiopia in these critical and 'implementational' steps.

Although Ethiopia is a multinational and multilingual country where over 80 languages are spoken, most of these languages have been denied equal government recognition and support during the past political systems. This has prevented the languages from developing to a level that would enable them to become languages of education and commerce, a media of dissemination for science and technology, means of cultural and literary growth.

**8. Arguments against Own Language Use in ELT Classroom:** Some researchers argue that using L1 in the L2 classroom might affect students' learning process negatively since it reduces the learners' exposure to L2 and reduces their opportunities for using the target language (Deller & Rinvoluceri, 2002; Polio & Duff, 1994). According to Krashen & Terrell (1983), L1 should not be used in the L2 classroom to enhance students' exposure to L2, since students acquire L2 through the same way they acquire their L1. Another argument is interference from the

mother tongue. Interference can make difficulty in the L2 learning and avoid that L1 should be separated from L2 learning (Cook, 2001; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). According to Harbord (1992), students may be assumed that word-by-word translation is a meaningful technique if teachers overuse L1 in their teaching, therefore they will work towards transferring meaning in L2 learning. Phillipson (1992) asserts that the more L2 is taught, the better the result. In line with his study, Auerbach (1993) indicates that students will learn more quickly if the more they are exposed to L2; as they hear and use L2, they will internalize it and begin to think in L2. Similarly, Polio & Duff (1994:322) showed that using L1 "prevents students from receiving input they might be exposed to in social situations outside the classroom".

Some of the researchers strongly disagree to use L1 in L2 class. According to Harmer (2001), overuse of L1 restricts students' associates with the L2. In a second language learning classroom, to a great extent of own language will be a hindrance to achieving L2. Sharma (2006) mentions that only using L2 in the classroom is that the more students are exposed to English, the more quickly they will learn; as they hear and use English, they will internalize it to begin to think in English.

**9. Arguments for using own Language in the EFL Classroom:** There are many occasions when using the students' L1 in the classroom has obvious advantages. For example, D Jabr Dajani (2002) suggests its use in planning, self-evaluation, and learner training, where, if the teacher speaks the students' L1, these topics can be discussed fluently instead of in the hesitant English of a beginner or elementary student. Sheelagh Deller (2003) suggests that, among other things, it is useful for students to notice the differences between their L1 and the target language, that when students use their L1 between themselves and with the teacher has a positive effect on group dynamics, and that it allows students to give ongoing feedback about the course and their experiences of learning much more fluently than they would if they were only using English. Daniel Linder (2002) suggests a number of translation activities for use in the general classroom. These include straight translations of short texts and a translation summary of a longer text. His recommendation is that these activities should be done in groups because a discussion of the issues they raise is likely to be more revealing for two or more people than when we just think about it ourselves. Boris Naimushin (2002), resounding about own language use in the modern world, perceives translation as the 'fifth skill' after reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

**10. Design:** Descriptive case study research design (Yin 2003a, 2003b) is used to carry out this study because it enables to look at human attitudes and actions in detail ranging from an individual to class, school, or entire unity (McKay 2008). In this study, a case study is preferred as it enables a careful and complete observation of EFL

teachers and learners while carrying out interactions in the teaching and learning process in detail.

**11. Methodology:** Mixed method is used to collect and analyze the data because of the following reasons; using a mixed methods strategy has its own benefits compared with using just one method, it helps to use more than one research method, it helps to combine more than one kind of research data, it uses multiple methods of data collection instruments, it allows using quantitative and qualitative data, it improves the accuracy of data, it provides more a complete picture of the study, it helps as an aid to the sampling of participants, it uses as a means for compensating the strengths and weaknesses of particular methods and the principle that mixed methods research is fundamentally good practice (Denscombe, 2007:121). Observations, interviews, and questionnaires were used to collect the data.

**12. Sampling:** Six teachers were involved in classroom observation; out of them, 2 teachers were randomly selected for in-depth interview, then one -to-one interview was made and 25 teachers were participated to fill the questionnaire, out of the total 32 English language teachers in the school. The teachers to be observed were selected purposively. 30 participant students were selected by using a stratified random sampling technique. The quantitative data from the learners are used for triangulating the qualitative data that was gathered from the teachers. When the quantitative data was analyzed by SPSS 20 software, the qualitative data were analyzed by using Open Code 4 software.

### 13. Results

**Table 1:** Reliability Test

| No | Participants | No of participants | No of items | Cronbach's Alpha |
|----|--------------|--------------------|-------------|------------------|
| 1  | Teachers     | 25                 | 50          | .847             |
| 2  | Students     | 30                 | 25          | .766             |

As indicated in table 1, the teachers' and students' questionnaire reliability coefficient or the Cronbach's Alpha test result is displayed as 0.847 and 0.766, respectively. Reliability coefficient ranges between 0 and 1. 0 indicates unreliability and shows perfect reliability. The above observed Cronbach's alphas are greater than 0.75, as Shaw and Right (1967) suggested that 0.75 indicates a good degree of internal consistency of the information gathered through the instrument. Therefore, the internal consistencies of the teachers' and students' responses to the items provide very good internal consistency; because 0.847 and 0.766 are reasonably greater than 0.75. This made the researcher accept the reliability of the instrument with reasonable confidence.

### 14. English language teachers' attitude towards learners' own language (Amharic) use in EFL classroom.

**Table 2:** Learners' own language should be used in English class

| Valid             | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent |
|-------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|
| Strongly Disagree | 2         | 8.0     | 8.0           |
| Disagree          | 7         | 28.0    | 28.0          |
| Neutral           | 3         | 12.0    | 12.0          |
| Agree             | 9         | 36.0    | 36.0          |
| Strongly Agree    | 4         | 16.0    | 16.0          |
| Agree Total       | 25        | 100.0   | 100.0         |

As shown in the above Table 2, 36% and 16% of the respondents were on the point of 'strongly agree' and 'agree'. This shows that a total of 52% of respondents have a positive attitude towards learners' own language use in EFL classrooms. This implies that the majority of the respondents agree that learners' own language should be used in EFL classrooms. Therefore, English language teachers' attitude towards learners' own language use in EFL classrooms seems to be positive.

**Table 3:** Teachers should follow an English-only policy in the classroom

| .                 | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent |
|-------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|
| Strongly Disagree | 6         | 24.0    | 24.0          |
| Disagree          | 12        | 48.0    | 48.0          |
| Neutral           | 2         | 8.0     | 8.0           |
| Agree             | 5         | 20.0    | 20.0          |
| Agree Total       | 25        | 100.0   | 100.0         |

Table 3 also shows that 24% and 48% of the respondents were on the point of 'strongly disagree' and 'disagree'. This shows that a total of 72% of respondents have also a positive attitude towards learners' own language use in EFL classrooms. This implies that the vast majority of the respondents disagreed that teachers should follow an English-only policy in the classroom. This means majority of the respondents agreed that teachers shouldn't follow an English-only policy in EFL classrooms. Therefore, English language teachers' attitude towards learners' own language use in EFL classrooms seems to be still positive

### 15. Reasons to use learners' own language (Amharic) in EFL classroom.

**Table 4:** It is appropriate to use Amharic to explain difficult concepts

| Valid          | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent |
|----------------|-----------|---------|---------------|
| Disagree       | 1         | 4.0     | 4.0           |
| Agree          | 11        | 44.0    | 44.0          |
| Strongly Agree | 13        | 52.0    | 52.0          |
| Agree Total    | 25        | 100.0   | 100.0         |

Table 4 indicates that 44% and 52% of the respondents were on the point of 'agree' and 'strongly agree' respectively. This shows that a total of 96% of the respondents agreed that learners' own language is appropriate to explain difficult concepts. This implies that great majority of the respondents agree that learners' own language use in EFL classrooms is appropriate when they face concept difficulties. Thus, English language teachers' reason to use learners' own language in EFL classrooms is to clarify difficult concepts.

**Table 5:** It is appropriate to use Amharic to help low-level learners than high-level learners

| Valid          | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent |
|----------------|-----------|---------|---------------|
| Disagree       | 2         | 8.0     | 8.0           |
| Neutral        | 4         | 16.0    | 16.0          |
| Agree          | 14        | 56.0    | 56.0          |
| Strongly Agree | 5         | 20.0    | 20.0          |
| Total          | 25        | 100.0   | 100.0         |

Table 5 displays that 56% and 20% of the respondents were on the point of 'agree' and 'strongly agree' correspondingly. This confirms that a total of 86% of the respondents agreed that learners' own language is appropriate to help low-level learners than high-level learners. This suggests that the vast majority of the respondents agree that learners' own language use in EFL classrooms is appropriate to help low-level learners. Accordingly, English language teachers' reason to use learners' own language in EFL classrooms is to support low achiever students.

**Table 6:** My English teacher likes to use Amharic in the English classroom to explain the grammar rules

| Valid             | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent |
|-------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|
| Strongly Disagree | 2         | 6.6     | 6.6           |
| Agree             | 11        | 36.7    | 36.7          |
| Strongly Agree    | 17        | 56.7    | 56.7          |
| Total             | 30        | 100.0   | 100.0         |

Table 6 presents the results of learners' responses to teachers' practice and use of learners' own language in EFL classrooms. Thus, 36.7% and 56.7% of the respondents were on the point of 'agree' and 'strongly agree' sequentially. This settles that a total of 93.4% of the respondents agree that their English language teachers like to use Amharic (learners' own language) in the EFL classroom to explain grammar rules. This infers that the vast majority of the respondents (students) are confirmed that English language teachers use students' own language in the EFL classroom when they teach grammar rules. Therefore; as a practice, English language teachers use learners' own language in the EFL classroom during grammar lesson teaching.

**Table 7:** My English teacher prefers to use Amharic to save his/her time

| Valid             | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent |
|-------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|
| Strongly Agree    | 11        | 36.7    | 36.7          |
| Agree             | 12        | 40.0    | 40.0          |
| Disagree          | 4         | 13.3    | 13.3          |
| Strongly Disagree | 3         | 10      | 10            |
| Total             | 30        | 100.0   | 100.0         |

Table 7 also shows that 36.7% and 40% of the respondents replied 'strongly agree' and 'agree' respectively. Meaning 76.7% of respondents agreed that English language teachers prefer to use learners' own language to save time in EFL classrooms. This illustrates that the best part of the respondents agreed that teachers use learners' own language to save time. Therefore; as a practice, English language teachers use students' own language to save time in the EFL classroom.

**16. Qualitative Data Analysis:** The researcher has made qualitative data analysis with Open Code 4 software which is the latest qualitative data analysis software. Based on the qualitative data gathered through in-depth interviews, respondents confirmed that they use learners' own language in EFL classrooms. This shows that respondents' perceived attitude towards learners' own language use in EFL classrooms is positive. As a pushing factor, respondents have their own reasons to use learners' own language in EFL classrooms; these are 'to motivate students, students cannot understand English, to help students own language makes the lesson simple, own language use is a good way of teaching, students' weakness, teachers' weakness, most of the students are poor in vocabulary.

## 17. Major Findings

- Majority of English language teachers' attitude towards learners' own language use in EFL classrooms is positive. The best part (72%) of the respondents agreed that teachers should not follow an English policy in EFL classrooms.
- The vast majority (96%) of the respondents agreed that learners' own language is appropriate to explain difficult concepts. This means English language teachers' reason to use learners' own language in EFL classrooms is to clarify difficult concepts. The great majority (86%) of the respondents agreed that learners' own language is appropriate to help low-level learners than high-level learners.
- The vast majority (93.4%) of the students confirmed that English language teachers use students' own language in the EFL classroom when they teach grammar rules. The best part (76.7%) of the students agreed that teachers use learners' own language to save time.

- The qualitative findings of the study also show that teachers' perceived attitude towards learners' own language use in EFL classrooms is positive. As a pushing factor, respondents have their own reasons to use learners' own language in EFL classroom; these are 'to motivate students, students cannot understand English, to help students own language makes the lesson simple, own language use is a good way of teaching, students' weakness, teachers' weakness, students' poor vocabulary, if it is English only classroom, students do not want to participate actively in class, and they perceived that own language use in EFL class do not reduce learning exposure rather own language helps as a teaching tool'.

### 18. Conclusions

The result confirms that teachers' attitudes towards learners' own language use in EFL classrooms are a positive and important tool that could contribute a lot to students' success. English language teachers' reason to use learners' own language in EFL classrooms is to clarify difficult concepts, motivate students, help students, save time, teach grammar rules and teachers do have another learner-based pushing factors and reasons like: students cannot understand English, own language makes the lesson simple, own language use is a good way of teaching, students' weakness, teachers' weakness, and students' poor vocabulary.

Generally, this study offers some implications, particularly the positive attitude toward learners' own language use in the EFL classroom indicated by teachers. That is, teachers' perceived attitude towards learners own language use in EFL classrooms would have a positive return to the teaching and learning processes.

**19. Recommendations:** The researcher would like to recommend that learners' own language in EFL classrooms shall be used in some degree of mode in applicable situations in EFL classrooms. Own language should be used reasonably and thoughtfully. Language policymakers should establish workshops and training for teachers to allow them to choose the proper use of learners' own language. A comparative study should be conducted on English language teachers' practices and their effectiveness in EFL classrooms.

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