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## A Survey on Primary Students' Attitude toward Teachers' Use of Mother Tongue in English Classrooms at Primary Schools in Binh Duong

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### Abstract

*It is a controversial issue whether to use or not to use mother language in teaching English in primary classrooms. The purpose of this research paper is to investigate the reality of speaking Vietnamese in English classrooms in several primary schools in Binh Duong province. 23 primary students in Binh Duong were asked to answer a list of questions to learn about their attitude toward L1 in L2 lessons. It turned out that nearly 70% of teachers at primary schools in Binh Duong usually used L1 in their L2 classes to explain new words and difficult terms. The majority of primary students preferred L1 use and had a positive attitude toward teachers' use of Vietnamese when appropriate use of L1 to support and facilitate EFL classroom. We recommend that the teacher's intensity of using L1 in L2 context should be taken into consideration in accordance to the students' proficiency.*

**Keywords:** L1 in L2 classrooms, primary students, attitudes

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## 1. Introduction

English is considered the first priority because of its significant role in modern society. While English has now become a global language, it is a compulsory subject for all learners of different ages and levels in the educational system. Primary students aged 6 to 10 years are no exception.

Educators have been working on appropriate methodologies for teaching and learning English at different levels because they understand that English acquisition depends strongly on learning strategies and techniques. Among traditional teaching methods, the mother language in ESL or EFL classrooms is commonly used as a teaching tool (Weng, 2012). There was once a debate about using L1 in L2 classrooms in terms of reasons and purposes, attitudes of teachers and students of L1, and its effectiveness in language acquisition. Many people believe that using the mother tongue may prevent learners from having the greatest chance of absorbing English, creating avoidance and neglect or making them rely too much on translation; others believe that for low-level students, the mother language makes them feel more confident in comprehension.

With primary students, using L1 in an EFL class has now been a trend because of their young age and low level of English. Primary teachers find it unavoidable to speak Vietnamese when teaching English. The questions are whether their use of their mother tongue results in positive or negative attitudes from their students and whether it benefits them.

As mentioned above, the topic “A Survey on Primary Students’ Attitudes toward Teachers’ Use of Mother Tongue in English Classrooms at Primary Schools in Binh Duong” was conducted in the hope of determining their attitudes toward their mother tongue in language learning.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Teaching English to primary students**

#### *2.1.1 Children’s language learning*

Teaching young learners can be simple or complicated. According to Vale (1995) and Scott and Ytreberg (1993), children are active, creative and natural learners who often watch what people around say and how they express themselves and then reproduce different or more expressions for communicative approaches.

Similarly, Harmer (2001) described a few traits of young learners, such as responding to meaning regardless of individual words; learning from experience, that is, what they see, hear, touch or feel; being curious about the surrounding world; becoming bored easily after several minutes; and being keen to talk about their own experience and need approval from teachers.

Therefore, it can be said that starting teaching L2 at an early age would be better than waiting until puberty (Krashen, 1981). Teaching English should start at a young age because young learners are very effective at their age (Mwalongo, 2016; Ratminingsih & Budasi, 2018). Other researchers also state that at this age (before their teens), learners not only learn but also have the ability to master languages approaching native speakers and that they have more learning strategies than adults (Afrizal, 2015). On the other hand, Rich (2018) argued that teaching English to young learners is “a demanding and skilled process, particularly with children in the early grades of primary school” (p. 49); the younger the learners are, the more demanding the tasks become.

#### *2.1.2 Teaching English to primary students*

It is obvious that teaching young learners is different from teaching adults because they have different characteristics. Teachers should consider how to talk with children and how to enter the children’s world.

Teachers play an important role in primary education and determine the success of the language process (Habibi & Sofwan, 2015). Therefore, teachers should have both professional and pedagogical competence in teaching English to young learners. Wilden and

Porsch (2017) argued that ‘the teacher is very much at the center of the FL classroom as opposed to the generally more learner-center approach of primary education’ (p. 20).

### **2.2. Advantages of using the mother tongue in teaching English at primary schools**

Primary students are those at the very elementary English level. Learning with a Vietnamese teacher might make them feel calm and more confident. Mouhanna (2009) claims that the lower students’ level is, the greater the demand for L1, indicating that this pedagogical method for learning at lower levels is very helpful. Atkinson (1987) also believes that in some

cases, translation is necessary to ensure that children focus on accuracy and understand concepts quickly. Mukattash (2003) added that translation can help learners identify similar structures that might be confused.

L1 can be used either to explain vocabulary meaning or grammar structures or for warm-up. There are possible occasions when dropping English for a moment and using L1 might not be harmful but could save time and energy (Wilis, 1981). Meanwhile, Cook (2001) states that low-level students lack linguistic information; therefore, it is quite preferable to explain grammar structures in the mother tongue. Learners need to understand what the structures include, in what cases they should be used, and what kinds of meanings they convey. Furthermore, L1 is a good tool for starting lessons. A few abstract topics and concepts that are difficult to explain to children in L2 become easier to understand with the support of L1 in warming-up activities. Hence, children will definitely feel secure about beginning a lesson (Weschler, 1997).

However, using L1 to provide difficult instructions or explain confusing structures is justified. The key thing is that the students need to understand the structures and are able to reproduce the tasks themselves without having to translate them again. To that end, in primary classes, L1 plays a supportive and facilitating role (Tang, 2002). Muhammad (2011) also found that when a class is noisy, L1 is more effective at maintaining order. Limited and judicious use of the mother tongue does not reduce students' exposure to English.

### ***2.3 Disadvantages of using the mother tongue in teaching English at primary schools***

Krashen (1981) suggested that the use of the mother tongue in language learning should be limited because the L2 learning process follows the same route as L1 acquisition; therefore, this might prevent learners from receiving the greatest benefits.

Ellis (1984) added that using large amounts of L1 in L2 classrooms can make learners dependent on L1. Consequently, language acquisition is less likely to occur. Krashen (1985) encouraged language teachers to support their students in the target language as much as possible to create a definite relationship between comprehensible input in L2 and proficiency. Atkinson (1987) suggested that L1 should be used no more than five percent of the time in EFL classrooms. Overuse of L1 may hinder L2 learning and create dependency on the mother tongue. According to Sharma (2006), the rationale for using only the TL 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; the only way they will learn it is if they are forced to use it".

## **3. Research Methodology**

This section describes the methodology employed in the current project. The first part describes the research questions. The second part highlights the research design with a description of the instruments, participants, and procedures for collecting the data.

### ***3.1 Research questions:***

(1) What is the reality of using Vietnamese in several primary schools in Bình Dương Province?

(2) How are students' attitudes toward teachers' use of their mother tongue in EFL primary classrooms?

### 3.2 Research design

#### 3.2.1 Participants

Twenty-three students from grade 1 to grade 5 in several different primary schools in Bình Dương Province were asked to complete a 7-item questionnaire to assess the reality of the use of Vietnamese in their English classrooms and their attitudes toward L1 in L2 lessons. At these ages, some students might find it difficult to understand the questions and are unlikely to describe the situations in their classroom. Therefore, it is necessary to have support from their parents.

#### 3.2.2 Instruments

The research employs only qualitative methods, including a questionnaire to learn about the use of Vietnamese in primary English classrooms and teachers' attitudes toward L1 in L2 lessons.

The survey is divided into 2 main parts: the first part includes questions to ask about the true situations in their classrooms, i.e., whether they have a native teacher in English lessons; whether their teachers of English speak English regularly in class; how much Vietnamese they use; and when they use the mother tongue. The second part concerns students' attitudes toward Vietnamese use in English lessons.

## 4. Data Analysis and Results

This part shows the responses from the participants.

### 4.1 The reality of using Vietnamese in primary English classrooms

First, native teachers are rare in primary schools in Bình Dương Province. According to the survey, only 1 of the 23 students had a foreign teacher in his/her class, and the teacher was always accompanied by a Vietnamese assistant.

In terms of using Vietnamese when teaching English, there is a result as follows: in the participants' classrooms, their teachers always or usually speak Vietnamese when teaching English (69.6% altogether), while only 2 out of 23 teachers never speak Vietnamese, which is a very small percentage.

Table 1. Frequency of using Vietnamese in English classrooms

Frequency of using English in primary classrooms	Percentage (P)
Always	17,4%
Usually	52,2%
Sometimes	21,7%
Never	8,7%

In addition, it is also necessary to know when teachers of English speak Vietnamese.

*Table 2. When to use Vietnamese in English classrooms*

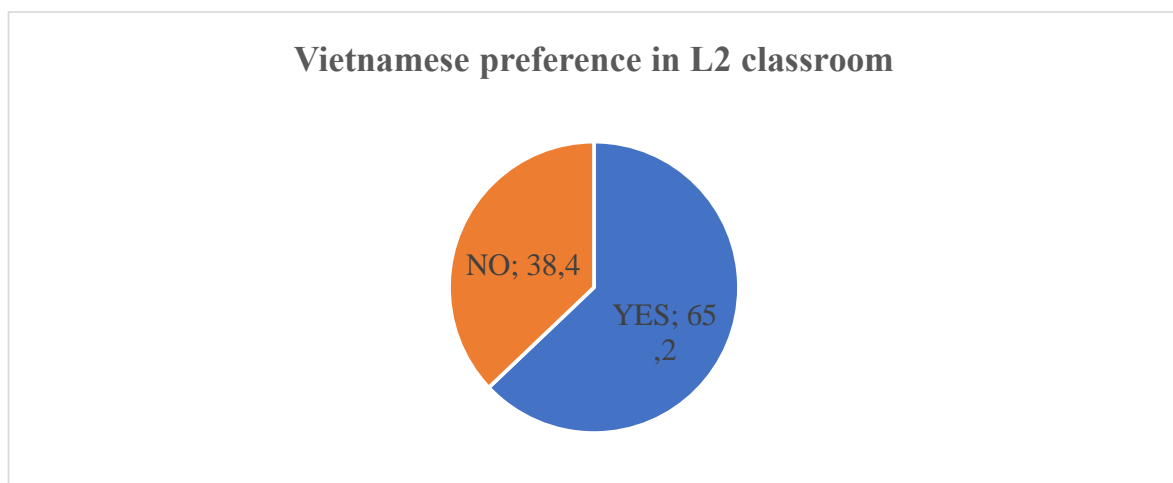
<b>Reasons for using bilingual language in English classroom</b>	<b>Percentage (P)</b>
To introduce a new lesson	17,4%
To explain new words	30,4%
To explain new grammar structures	4,3%
To manage class	4,3%
To explain abstract and difficult terms	21,7%

Table 2 shows that most of them borrow their mother language to give a new word meaning (30,4%), or when it is too complicated to explain abstract or difficult terms in English (21,7%). Vocabulary is a key thing for teaching children, so understanding every word is not easy, especially for those in unfamiliar fields. Consequently, using the mother tongue is a good idea for teachers. Some other teachers spoke Vietnamese at the beginning of the lessons to introduce the topic (17,4%). Interestingly, teachers did not use Vietnamese to teach grammar and manage the class, which ranks in the lowest position at 4,3%.

In general, in this part, the survey shows that native speakers are rare at the primary level, and in cases where there is one, they are normally assisted by a Vietnamese teacher when children do not understand 100% English. Moreover, Vietnamese teachers use Vietnamese quite a lot in such settings. Most of the time, the mother tongue can help teachers explain new terms, especially difficult ones.

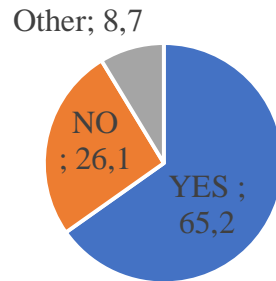
#### **4.2. Students' attitudes toward L1 in L2 classrooms**

Over half of the participants preferred to have Vietnamese when studying English, while the other 38.4% of them argued that teachers should not (Figure 1).

*Figure 1. Vietnamese preferences in the L2 classroom*

However, when asked if they like teachers only speak English, only 26% of them say yes because most of them think it is impossible for them to totally understand English (65,2%) (Figure 2).

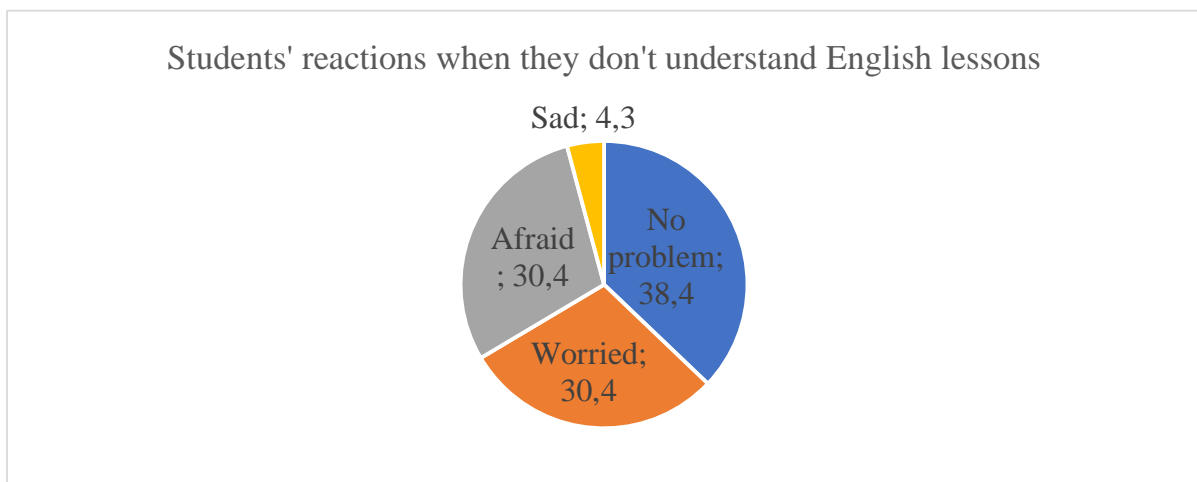
**100% English preference**



*Figure 2. 100% English preference*

The reasons for the above results can be explained by the following chart. Figure 3 shows the students’ reactions when they did not understand their lessons in English.

Students' reactions when they do not understand English lessons.



*Figure 3. Students’ reactions when they do not understand English lessons*

Figure 3 illustrates students’ reactions to English lessons when they do not understand. Overall, there are two groups of reactions: 1 positive (no problem) and 1 negative (Sad, Afraid and Worried). A total of 38.4% of the participants thought it was ok not to understand their teacher, while the rest of them had specific problems in this case.

This can be explained by students at this age not having an understanding of the lessons given, which may be necessary for them or not. That is the reason why they felt normal. On the other hand, more than 60% of the students had negative reactions when lessons in English were difficult for them to understand, and both had feelings such as worry, fear or even sadness.

These emotional feelings can make students feel bored when using many L2s in the L2 classroom. To put it simply, students' proficiency is not as good as expected, and appropriate use of English in the L2 classroom could be more beneficial for those students.

In sum, many students appreciate Vietnamese L2 lessons. Although quite a large number of them like listening and speaking English, they are not very confident when their teachers use only L2, and they often experience negative feelings when they cannot understand something. This may be the reason why their teachers usually speak Vietnamese in teaching, as shown in the results of part 1.

## 5. Discussion, conclusion and recommendation

### 5.1 Discussion and conclusion

The results of the research **have** shown the following:

(1) 100% English is impossible in primary schools in Binh Duong Province. There are few foreign teachers in EFL classrooms, and even when there is one, a Vietnamese teacher should also be present for support. Moreover, Vietnamese teachers tend to use their mother tongue to explain new words, abstract or difficult terms and start a lesson. The result is quite similar to what has been found by researchers mentioned earlier in the paper. This confirms the role of L1 in keeping young learners calm, confident, secured and not confused with ambiguous concepts and can save considerable time and energy for teachers. However, it is admitted from the theories that the use of L1 should be limited at a justified level, while in the case of primary schools in Binh Duong Province, teachers seem to use too much Vietnamese in students' viewpoints (most of them always or usually speak Vietnamese). This situation might make students depend on L1, preventing them from the best exposure to English.

(2) Primary students in Binh Duong like their teachers to speak Vietnamese when teaching English. Although many of them prefer English, they admit that they cannot understand everything in English, which leads to anxiety, worries and sadness. They highly appreciate the role of Vietnamese people in helping them understand better. Again, this result supports the advantages of L1 in the L2 context.

(3) On the other hand, using L1 in L2 classrooms is unavoidable compared with using L1 at the elementary level. Translation can support students greatly in language training. However, the more they are exposed to English, the more they hear, think and reproduce in English. To that extent, too much translation prevents them from naturally learning, leading to negative feelings when they fail to understand something without translation.

(4) To conclude, there could be a relationship between using Vietnamese and students' negative reactions. When students do not understand something, they expect their teachers to translate. With the overuse of Vietnamese people, they become dependable in L1; therefore, they become anxious, worried or unhappy when there is no translation. In the end, there is a need of explaining in L1 again.

### 5.2 Recommendation

Although L1 has many benefits for both teachers and students in L2 classrooms, L1 should only play a supportive and facilitating role in EFL classrooms. It can be used either to provide



meanings of abstract or difficult vocabulary or to explain grammatical structures, especially complicated ones.

Further research should be conducted to explore the deeper effects of L1 in the L2 context from teachers' perspectives.

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