



## The students' perceptions of the use of L1 in EFL classes: A Private Anatolian High School Sample

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### Abstract

The current study aims to demonstrate a Private Anatolian High School students' tendencies towards the issue of mother tongue (L1) use in English as a foreign language (EFL) classes. The study was conducted in the 2016-2017 academic year. The data were collected through the questionnaire developed by Prodromou (2002). 96 Private Anatolian High School students participated in the study. The motive for investigating this subject lies within the fact that using translation or code switching has been a subject of debate throughout the language history. Some studies assert the idea that the use of the mother tongue (L1) should be forbidden in classes due to the conflicts in students' minds especially when they are thinking a word's equal meaning in their L1. Others claim that the use of learners' mother tongue in English as a foreign language (EFL) classes can sometimes be helpful for the learning process. Nowadays, researchers highlight that the importance of English-only attitudes has been declining. In the light of these views, a descriptive study was conducted to bring about the students' perceptions of L1 use while learning English in EFL classes. Findings revealed that, in parallel with most studies on this issue, students seemed willing to use their mother tongue.

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*Keywords:* students' perceptions; mother tongue; target language; effects of mother tongue

## 1. Introduction

The Grammar Translation Method (GTM) dominated the language learning and teaching from the 1840s until the rise of the direct method in 1900s. GTM was used to facilitate learning in EFL classes since translation seemed to be the easiest way to teach a foreign language (FL). For the justification of the GTM use, Erton (2008) states that the aim is not to anticipate students to do perfect translations but to achieve the goals and the objectives of the course by the assistance of L1 by means of translation if

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needed. Duff and Polio (1990) point out that teachers use L1 for the purpose of motivating students, helping them to cope with some problematic situations and explaining some grammatical patterns.

Duff and Polio (1990) point out that instructors utilise L1 in order to motivate students and help them to clarify some syntactic patterns. Because of contradictions in the previous studies, students prefer bilingual teachers because they think that a bilingual teacher can be more beneficial to them. A bilingual teacher does not only know the language, but they also know the background and the culture of the learners, which are regarded as positive features of a bilingual teacher.

Cunningham (2000) advocates that translation can be utilized in language teaching no matter what the student's level of English proficiency is, providing that it is not used so profoundly. It is indicated that translation is useful for both teachers and students; Translation is applicable in both task-based lesson and communication based lessons. While learning and practising the foreign/second language, translation has psycho-linguistic value for students in the sense that they feel more comfortable and confident since it is possible for the students to interact with their teacher and friends in L1 to be able to take note of what they learn in L2.

Şenel (2010) in line with many researchers explains that translation is not a process of transferring meanings between two languages but it is a tool, which makes the understanding of the target language clear and accurate. He also claims that data are transferred consciously or unconsciously between both languages while translation and one language should be taught in connection with the languages acquired before.

Today, according to research done by many researchers, students' mother tongue can affect their L2 acquisition regarding skills and sub-skills in classes and are considered inevitable. In contrast with the English-only theory, starting the lessons with the use of L1 provides security in the learners' mind (Auerbach, 1993). In addition, Butzkamm (2003) is on the side of using mother tongue in the language classes. Students should refer to L1 for all school subject as well as foreign languages since L1 is the most powerful support. In parallel with these views, Larsen-Freeman (2000) claims that the mother tongue of the students is utilised in the classroom to ensure and upgrade the confidence of the students.

Sarıçoban (2010) underlined the necessity of using L1 in English classes in the light of findings in his study. 81.2% of the university students participated in the study were found in favour of utilising L1 and he stressed that teachers needed L1 as a medium of comprehension facilitator and positive attitude developer in English classes.

Kasmer (1999) proposes that translation is quite beneficial for the students in EFL regarding reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition. The time spent to reach a certain reading comprehension level is shortened thanks to translation. Furthermore, the students acquire vocabulary much faster with translation techniques. Since they know they can speak in L1 if they have difficulty in L2, they feel confident and relaxed.

Timuçin and Baytar (2015) also conducted a study with four teachers and twenty students at a state university by means of collecting data through recording the areas of code switching. The researchers have found that the areas code switching is mainly resorted are checking understanding, procedures and directions, explaining grammar, managing class and they underlined that code switching provides additional help for the students in the process of language learning.

Teachers in most public schools within Turkey use mainly learners' native language in main courses and skill courses instead of the target language although they know that using L2 provides better exposure to the target language. While doing so, teachers must primarily question the learner's age, proficiency level, class timing and purposes. Studies show that the age of the learners is the most effective factor about the L1 use, university students sometimes are on the side of English-only classes for their future career, in that university students are generally willing to use just the target language

(L2), they think that using only L2 make the learning process faster (Nazary, 2008), but primary or middle school students are on the side of L1 use in classes because they think that L1 should be used for explanations, management and checking in order to make the meaning clear.

### *1.1. Literature Review*

The debate over whether native language should be included or not in the English language classrooms has been a contentious subject for many years, and it seems that this controversial issue will be at the centre of the educational agenda for many coming years. Some supporting and opposing ideas provided by the research findings are given below to be able to have more broaden perspectives on this issue.

In his study based on the use of L1 in the L2 classroom, Schweers (1999) focused on both teachers' and learners' attitudes towards the use of L1 in the University of Puerto Rico. The participants' mother tongue was Spanish. Schweers monitored three lessons, which were 35 minutes each to see why teachers used Spanish and for what purposes. In addition, he conducted a questionnaire with 19 professors in that university. His study revealed that learners felt more relaxed while using their mother tongue but surprisingly, they also like English-only classes.

Burden (2001) studied with teachers and students and searched the answer for the question in what cases native English speaking teachers and Japanese college students have opposing ideas about the use of Japanese in English speaking classes. The participants, five native English speaking teachers, one from The United States of America, one from Canada, one from Australia and two from Great Britain, were chosen randomly and administered the questionnaire to 290 students at five universities, one national and four private, within Okayama City. The questionnaire was administered to the freshman in the first semester. The purpose of the questionnaire was to investigate the subject of how teachers and students evaluate the use of L1 in class. The results revealed that students favoured communication based language learning, and it should be emphasized in and outside the classroom and that teachers should apply both English and mother tongue to ensure that everything is clear about the task assuming that if there is something incomprehensible on the side of the students, it causes the erosion of the motivation.

Lasagabaster (2001) prepared questions about background information, English proficiency and metalinguistic awareness in four diverse parts such as reading, writing, listening and speaking to students of different grades. He studied with 126 5<sup>th</sup> grade 10 year-old students and 126 8<sup>th</sup> grade 13 year-old students. His hypothesis is "L1 has as much significant effect on the writing, reading grammar and English tests as the level of students' metalinguistic knowledge". Therefore, there is a high correlation between metalinguistic knowledge and four language skills. In addition, a connection between the metalinguistic awareness index and the four skills has a focal and encouraging role in the acquisition of additional languages.

Miles (2004) conducted a study at the University of Kent, in England with 18-19 years old freshmen Japanese male students studying English for six years with the purpose of focusing on two theories. First, utilizing L1 in the classroom does not prevent learning, and second, L1 has an important role in facilitating the learning a foreign language. Although he did not have generalizable results, overall findings revealed possible support for both theories, and thereby for the use of L1 in the classroom.

Brantmeier (2005) studied with three different groups about how the texts affect students reading comprehension in L1 and L2 learning. Firstly, 53 native Costa Ricans took part in advanced EFL course in Costa Rica; secondly 102 university students of intermediate and 138 university students of advanced Spanish in the United States participated in the study. His study shows that there are no positive effects between L1 and L2 because some texts do not include structural materials such as topic sentences and

signal words. Therefore, students compare their L1 and L2 knowledge and make differences or add incorrect knowledge to L2.

Vaezi and Mirzaei (2007) carried out their study to investigate the impact on using translation from L1 to L2. The purpose of this study is to justify that using translation from L1 to L2 has no impact on the improvement of Iranian EFL learners' linguistic accuracy. For this study, seventy male and eighty-five female Iranian pre-intermediate learners were chosen. Their ages were between 13 and 24. These learners were chosen from Paniz Language Institute, Eshragh Cultural Center, and Persian Language Institute. However, the findings revealed that the possibility of the viability of utilizing translation from L1 and L2 as a teaching method to enhance a group of Iranian EFL students' linguistic accuracy was bolstered.

In his study, Dujmovic (2007) focused on the attitudes of the students toward using Croatian in the EFL classroom. He studied with 100 freshmen attending University in Pula. Their proficiency levels were between intermediate and upper intermediate. The students decided that the translation of some words, complex ideas and even whole passages is a helpful way to learn a foreign language.

One of the researches about the role of L1 in L2 acquisition carried through by Nazary (2008) with Iranian University's students aimed to investigate the Iranian university students' attitudes towards the use of L1. Eighty-five EFL students both males and females took part in this study. The L1 of these students was Farsi, and they were studying English at Iranian University. As illustrated in this study, the first language of learners (L1) has a necessary and facilitating role in second language instruction.

Another investigation fulfilled by Weijen et al., (2008) concentrated on the impacts of first language (L1) writing on L2. This study depicts whether the relationship between the writing process and quality changes when writers compose text in a second language (L2). They studied with twenty-four students, they were almost all female, and their average age was 18. The study was carried out during their first semester at university. Twenty of them wrote four short argumentative essays in L1 (Dutch) and the others in L2 (English). Research has demonstrated that writers usually compose texts in much lower quality in L2.

Oluwole (2008) studied with 100 students who were chosen randomly from twelve schools and investigated the correlation between the level of proficiency in L1 and its effect in the process of learning L2. He found that all the drawbacks in L2 learning resulted from the inefficiency in the mother tongue. Other problems arose from teachers, in some parts of Nigeria, as they had limited knowledge of English themselves and were using tribal language and giving lectures in their mother tongue. These shortcomings affected the learning process of L2 negatively.

Kavaliauskienė (2009) searched the role of L1 in learning English for specific purposes (ESP). In this study, the participants were the students specializing in Social Sciences at the University and studying ESP. Participants consisted of 55 students whose ages ranged from 18 to 22 and were mostly females at the pre-intermediate and intermediate levels. This study brought about three different conclusions. Firstly, all the learners had strong reliance on their L1 in learning L2. Secondly, the amount of utilizing L1 in English classes differed according to the learners' proficiency level and linguistic capabilities. Finally, reading comprehension exercises, summary writing and back-translation activities generated by the students helped them raise awareness of differences between L1 and L2 and facilitated their linguistic advancement.

Mahmutoğlu and Kıcıır (2013) conducted a study with the purpose of investigating learners' and instructors' attitudes on utilizing L1 as a part of EFL classrooms and when to use it in the classroom. This study took place at the end of fall semester of the 2011-2012 academic year at The European University of Lefke. For this research, twenty-five instructors and one hundred and five students were chosen. The relationship between the attitudes of English language instructors and the learners was

measured through surveys given to instructors and learners. As a result, both instructors and learners did not object the use of the first language in language classrooms. They all expressed the idea that the first language ought to be used as a medium of instruction when necessary.

AbuHmaid's (2014) study centred on teachers and students' attitudes about using L1 in EFL Classrooms in a private School in Amman. In this research, both questionnaire and interview were used for data collection. Interviews with both teachers and students were conducted to highlight some issues related to the research. The questionnaires were distributed to 160 students, and their teachers were chosen to have authentic analysis for the case study. Findings revealed that teachers were aware of the fact that they had to avoid too much use of Arabic in EFL classes. The attitudes of the students in the case study vary from one aspect to another, but many students feel more relaxed and self-confident when using Arabic in English classes.

In their study investigating the use and functions of mother tongue in EFL classes, Paker and Karaağaç (2015) touched on some motives of instructors' referring L1 in their classes and underlined the factors such as level of the class, the content of the course, educational backgrounds, beliefs and experiences of the instructors. They found that teachers often used L1 for the irrelevant issues like attendance, checking the level of understanding; discussing course policies, or administrative information. Another striking point in their study was that the instructors were not aware how often they used L1 in their classes. As for the students' beliefs on the use of L1 in classes, they favoured the use of L2 more than L1 stating that the more English they used, the better they would learn it

## 1.2. Research question(s)

The aim of this study is to investigate the students' perceptions of the use of L1 in EFL classes; hence, the research question is;

\*To what extent do the students in an Anatolian high school make use of their L1 in the process of learning a foreign language and in what cases do they resort to their mother tongue.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The study was conducted in the 2016-2017 academic year. 96 (58 female, 38 male) Private Anatolian High school students participated in this study. Their ages varied between 15 and 17. The participants' mother tongue is Turkish, and they are learning English in a Private High School.

**Table 1.** The Profiles of the participants

Age	Female	%	Male	%	Total
15	21	21.88	15	15.62	37.50
16	22	22.92	13	13.54	36.46
17	15	15.62	10	10.42	26.04
Total	58	60.42	38	39.58	100.00

Table 1 depicts the participants' demographic information. 60,42 % (58 participants) of them are females, and the other 39,58 % are males. 37,50 % of the participants are at the age of 15. 36,46 % of the participants are 16 and the rest 26,04 % is 17.

### *2.1.1. Instruments*

A questionnaire developed by Prodromou (2002) was used for this research. In part I, participants were expected to give personal information, and in part II, they were expected to read and make decisions whether they agree (A) or disagree (D) with the statements. This questionnaire evaluates students' attitudes towards the use of L1 and whether the use of L1 is necessary or not and how it can affect their second language acquisition. The first three items examine what the students think about whether L1 should be used in class or not. Items 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 are about the use of L1 for explanations during the class. Item 9 is about whether they want to use L1 in pairs and groups. In item 10, students are asked whether they want the use of L1 for an English-equivalent of a word. Items 11, 12 and 13 ask whether a text or word in L2 should be translated to L1 to show the student's understandings. Items 14, 15 and 16 are for using L1 to check their comprehension.

### *2.2. Procedure*

The questionnaire was filled out by the students of different levels at the Private Anatolian High School. All participants were selected randomly from different levels of the classes. Firstly, a short introduction was given to the students to make the aim of this questionnaire clear. Students were asked to read the statements and questions and then decide whether they agree (A) or disagree (D). Besides, students were encouraged to share their opinions and make comments.

### *2.3. Data Analysis*

The data collected through a questionnaire were analysed utilising frequency and percentage calculations.

### *2.4. Limitations*

As the study was conducted with high school students, it may lack providing generalizable results for all settings. The results might be different when the study is implemented in different type of schools and with different age of students.

## **3. Findings**

All findings show that the Private Anatolian High School students are willing to use their mother tongue while learning English. This research shows that the majority of the students from different proficiency levels believe that the use of L1 is essential and they believe in the importance of L1.

**Table 2.** The necessities of L1

Items	Agree	%	Disagree	%
Item 1 - Should the teacher know the students' mother tongue?	80	83.3	16	16.7
Item 2 - Should the teacher use the students' mother tongue?	62	64.6	34	35.4
Item 3 - Should the students use their mother tongue?	64	66.7	32	33.3

According to Table 2, 83,3 % of the students believe that the teacher should know the students' mother tongue, and it is obvious that they want a non-native teacher. Item 2 is one of the most important questions and, asks "Should the teacher use the mother tongue in class?" and 64,6 % of the participants accepted the use of L1 in class. In item 3, only 33,3 % of the learners disagree and believe that teacher should not use their mother tongue.

**Table 3.** The use of L1 for explanations

Items	Agree	%	Disagree	%
Item 4 - explaining new words	65	67.7	31	32.3
Item 5 - explaining grammar	76	79.2	20	20.8
Item 6 -explaining grammar differences	74	77.1	22	22.9
Item 7 - explaining differences in the use of rules	75	78.1	21	21.9
Item 8 - giving instruction	65	67.7	31	32.3

The next four items evaluate whether the use of L1 is essential for explanations or not. (Items 4, 5, 6 and 7). As understood above in Table 5, item 5 (explaining grammar) got more support from the students (79,2 %), and 67,7 % of the participants think that teacher should use their mother tongue while explaining new words (Item 4). As for the items 6 and 7, they answered that teacher should use L1 while explaining differences between L1 and L2 grammar (77,1 %) and teacher should use L1 while explaining differences between rules of L1 and L2 (78,1 %). And lastly, the same with the items 4, 67,7 % of the students are on the side of the use of L1 while giving instruction. (Table 3).

**Table 4.** The time the students use their mother tongue

Items	Agree	%	Disagree	%
Item 9 - talking in pairs and groups	52	54.2	44	45.8
Item 10 - asking how do we say “ “	58	60.4	38	39.6
Item 11 - translating an L2 word into the L1 to check their understanding	64	66.7	32	33.3
Item 12 - translating a text from L2 to the L1 to check their understanding	69	71.9	27	28.1
Item 13 – translating as a test	59	61.5	37	38.5

As understood from Table 4, almost half of the students want to use L1 while they are talking in pairs and groups (Item 9). 39,6 % of the students disagree about L1 use by asking for an English-equivalent of a word (Item 10). Translation can be a useful as classroom activity; therefore, students can grasp the words and the whole meanings of texts clearly and, according to the results items 11, 12 and 13 most of the students think L1 is useful in the use of the translation of words and texts (66,7 %, 71,9 %, 61,5 %).

**Table 5.** The use of L1 in checking comprehension

Items	Agree	%	Disagree	%
Item 14 - check listening comprehension	60	62.5	36	38.5
Item 15 - check reading comprehension	64	66.7	32	33.3
Item 16 - discuss the method used in class	57	59.4	39	40.6

Table 5 shows the results of what the students think about the use of L1 while checking their comprehension. Here, 38,5 % of the students do not want the use of L1 to check listening skills comprehension (Item 14). 66,7 % of the students are in favour of the use of L1 in reading skills comprehension (Item 15). The last item, (item 16) questions about the significance of the mother tongue while discussing the methods used during the class. %40,6 of them think that using mother tongue while discussing methods is not essential.

#### 4. Discussion

The findings in the present study suggest that the participants are willing to use L1 in class and they wanted the teachers to know and use L1 in class. This urge from the participants might result from their ages. Nazary (2008) studied with the university students, and they did not incline the use of the mother-tongue for the sake of better exposure to L2. They were reluctant to use L1 to learn English very well for their careers but in the present study, the participants were younger, and they rejected the use of L2 during the class.

As understood from the findings in this study, the Private Anatolian High School students would like to feel able to use their mother tongue, and they wanted a non-native teacher in classes for explanations and in the Nazary's study, the participants wanted the use of L1 for explaining differences more than they wanted the use of L1 for explaining new words and grammar. As understood from results, both university and the Private Anatolian High School students could have problems about making distinctions between the rules of L1 and L2. Therefore, they needed the use of L1 for explaining differences between L1 and L2.

As for checking the students' preference for checking specific comprehension, participants agreed that students could use their mother tongue while asking how they say '...' in English.

Translation can be seen as a useful classroom activity. Translation trains the learner to search (flexibility) for the most appropriate meanings of the words (clarity) (Duff, 1989). As Duff stated, translation can help learner development in L2 and can make the learning process attractive and therefore; students can grasp the words and the whole meanings of texts clearly, and most of the students in the current study accept the presence of the use of translation of words and texts.

It is hard to say that there are inconsistent results between previous studies and the current one due to the participants' cultural background and ages since the participants mostly grew up in the same environment and shared the same culture. It is a well-known fact that students coming from average income families mostly prefer the faculties of Education. Therefore, there were no obvious differences in their attitudes towards the use of L1 in English classes. So as to the differences in the results regarding gender -38 males and 58 females, their ideas about the items were approximately the same.

The observation in the field also demonstrated that the language learners prefer mother tongue as a medium of communication with their instructors. One of the researchers of the current study remained rather strict in running L2 only classes in and out of the school environment at the university level and observed that some students tried to solve their problems with the other instructors to whom they could communicate in L1. This case revealed the fact that there was no point in being intolerant with the use of L2 in and out of the school environment and the students were permitted to use L1 when necessary at the minimum level. Therefore, it is possible to claim that bilingual approach is inevitable to form a good rapport with the students at any level.

## 5. Limitations and Suggestions

The current study has a few limitations in terms of generalizability and data collection instruments. First of all, the participants are limited to only one private college. So, the findings cannot be generalized to the whole universe. In order to overcome this problem, further studies can be conducted on participants from different colleges in different settings. Another limitation can be related to the data collection instruments and procedure. In order to fortify the results, different data collection instruments such as classroom observations and interviews can be employed. By doing so, deeper understanding of learners' perceptions and attitudes of L1 use in L2 settings can be better identified.

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## Öğrencilerin yabancı dil sınıflarında anadil kullanımına ilişkin algıları:

### Bir özel anadolu lisesi örneği

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#### Öz

Bu çalışmanın amacı, bir Özel Anadolu Lisesi öğrencilerinin, anadillerini (L1) İngilizce olarak yabancı dil (YDİ) derslerinde kullanma konusundaki eğilimlerini ortaya koymaktır. Çalışma 2016-2017 akademik yılında gerçekleştirilmiştir. Veriler, Prodromou (2002) tarafından geliştirilen anket yoluyla toplanmıştır. Çalışmaya 96 Özel Anadolu Lisesi öğrencisi katılmıştır. Bu konuyu araştırmak için gerekçe, çeviri veya kod geçişinin dil tarihi boyunca bir tartışma konusu olması gerçeğinde yatmaktadır. Her ne kadar bazı araştırmalar, özellikle öğrencilerin bir kelimenin anadillerindeki anlamını düşündüklerinde, zihinlerindeki çatışmalardan dolayı anadil (L1) kullanımının sınıflarda yasaklanması gerektiği fikrini öne sürse de, diğerleri yabancı dil olarak İngilizce dili (YDİ) derslerinde anadil kullanımının bazen öğrenme sürecine yardımcı olabileceğini iddia etmektedir. Günümüzde araştırmacılar, derslerde sadece hedef dil kullanımı tutumunun öneminin azaldığını vurgulamaktadır. Bu görüşlerin ışığında, öğrencilerin EFL sınıflarında İngilizce öğrenirken L1 kullanım algılarını ortaya çıkarmak için tanımlayıcı bir çalışma yapılmıştır. Bulgular, bu konudaki çalışmaların çoğuna paralel olarak, öğrencilerin anadillerini kullanmaya istekli olduklarını ortaya koymuştur.

*Anahtar sözcükler:* Öğrenci Algıları; Anadil; İkinci Dil; Anadilin Etkileri.

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#### AUTHOR BIODATA

Orhan KOCAMAN has been working as an Assist. Prof. of ELT at Sakarya University since 2015. He worked as a lecturer at the same university for 13 years following 10 years of teaching at a private college in İstanbul. He earned his B.A. degree at the Department of English Language Teaching at Marmara University in 1990, M.A. degree at the Department of Computer and Instructional Technologies at Sakarya University in 2005 and Ph.D. degree at the Department of English Language Teaching at Yeditepe University in 2015. He has been giving lectures on SLA, Approaches to ELT, Material development and design, Material design and evaluation, Discourse analysis and Teaching English to Young Learners.

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