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## L1 in the Primary English Classroom: How Much, When, How and Why? <sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

The use of L1 in L2 classes has long been debated in the field of TESOL. Although at least some use of the L1 is now widely advocated, questions remain about what might count as acceptable or effective use. While a number of studies have been carried out in secondary and tertiary settings to investigate these questions, research in primary school settings remains relatively rare. This article addresses the gap by investigating L1 use in primary classes in Turkey. Drawing on observational and interview data with five primary EFL teachers, we investigate how much, when, how, and why teachers use L1 in their English classrooms. The results showed that, despite some negative attitudes towards L1 use, the teachers used it to different degrees and for various purposes including giving instruction, providing feedback and asking questions. The teachers also identified a number of practical reasons for their decisions, namely, students' proficiency level, achieving target-curriculum, saving time and teaching specific language points. We conclude that L1 is an inseparable part of the L2 classroom, and each teacher has their own unique way of using it.

**Keywords:** L1 use; young learners; primary English; bilingual teaching

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## Introduction

Classroom language use has long been fiercely debated in teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL), with frequent swings between the English-only classroom and the acceptable use of learners' L1. However, it is fair to say that in academic circles at least, a bilingual view of language classrooms now prevails and the use of both L1 and L2<sup>1</sup> is accepted, and indeed encouraged (Copland & Ni, 2018). Nevertheless, how languages are used in the classroom and how they could most effectively be used remains a matter for discussion. Some studies have looked at actual classroom language use (see, for example, Mcmillan & Rivers, 2011; Sali, 2014; Song & Lee, 2019; Wang, 2019) but these remain relatively small in number, given the importance of this aspect of classroom interaction. Even fewer studies have looked at language use in primary English classrooms (see, for example, Copland & Yonetsugi, 2016; Oga-Baldwin & Nakata, 2014), in spite of the exponential growth in teaching English to young learners over the last 20 years or so.

This article addresses the gap by investigating L1 use in English language classrooms in Turkish state primary schools. An in-depth understanding of how and why young learner (YL) teachers use L1 in actual L2 classroom situations is important if we are to establish what effective L1 use might mean in the context of primary language learning and support teachers in making informed decisions.

## Review of the Literature

The use of learners' first language (L1) in the teaching of a new language (L2) has been the subject of much controversy and has coalesced around two main ideas: monolingual and bi-lingual language teaching. Monolingual language teaching is predicated on an almost complete avoidance of the use of L1 in the class, and on maximum exposure to the L2 as the optimum approach to language learning. It has been regarded as the norm and is embraced by recent methods such as Communicative Language Teaching and Task-Based Language Learning and Teaching (Bruen & Kelly, 2014). However, the English only classroom has been increasingly questioned in favour of bilingual teaching which is based on the notion that L1 has a facilitative role in L2 learning and therefore should have a place in the language classroom (Butzkamm, 2003; Copland, 2018; Edstrom, 2006; Hall & Cook, 2012; Littlewood & Yu, 2011).

Both views draw on Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories and are supported by empirical studies. Arguments in favour of the L2-only classroom, for example, are based on the notion that L2 learning should mirror L1 acquisition and that the negative influence of L1 in L2 learning/teaching should be avoided (Brooks-Lewis, 2009; Bruen & Kelly, 2014; Ellis, 2005). However, perhaps the strongest argument, according to Macaro (2001), is the need for learners' exposure to the L2. Since L2 input is regarded as a crucial element of successful language learning (Ellis, 2005, 2008), it is important to "create an input-rich environment which provides learners with optimal opportunities for meaningful use of the target language ..." (Kim & Elder, 2008 p. 167). Teachers' L1 use is seen as reducing the amount of L2 input, and therefore adversely affecting the learning process. This is regarded as a particularly valid argument against L1 use in foreign language settings where learners have limited opportunities to engage with L2 out of class.

In contrast to the arguments in favour of the L2-only classroom, others maintain that L1 should be used in L2 teaching "cautiously" (Hall & Cook, 2012 p. 294) and in a "systematic, selective and judicious" way (Butzkamm, 2003 p. 36), but without opening "the floodgates of L1 use" (Littlewood & Yu, 2011 p. 64). There are also those who go beyond the idea of a limited use of L1 as a facilitative tool and advocate for a bilingual approach, encouraging language teachers to

teach bilingually (Copland, 2018; Copland & Ni, 2018). Considering that the majority of children in the world, perhaps as many as two thirds, are at least bilingual (Crystal, 2003), the argument is that the teaching context should mirror language use in the outside environment. Copland (2018 p.59), for example, recommends bilingual activities that draw on both L1 and L2 use. She believes that bilingualism should be “normalized” in the language classroom, in the same way as in the outside world, rather than treating the L1 as something to be avoided where possible.

In order to investigate the effect of L1 on L2 learning and teaching, several empirical studies have been carried out, revealing often contradictory results. While some studies seem to show negative effects of L1 use on learners’ success rate (Mahmoud, 2012; Moyer, 2006; Weitz et al., 2010), there are others that show the positive effects of L1 in L2 learning and teaching, especially in the affective dimension (Brooks-Lewis, 2009; Bruen & Kelly, 2014; Liao, 2006) and in scaffolding learning (Bhooth et al., 2014; Sali, 2014; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003). This shows that both views can find empirical evidence for their positions and the debate is likely to continue.

Despite the increasing criticism of L2-only language teaching, there is lack of consensus about when and how much L1 should be used in a bilingual approach. Although there are a number of general recommendations about “judicious” or “limited” L1 use from several researchers (see, for example, Cook, 2001; Littlewood & Yu, 2011; Nation, 2003), what such terms might actually mean in practice is not specified. Indeed, Macaro (2005) argues that such advice is neither particularly useful nor informative, especially for new teachers who lack experience. Macaro (2005 p. 81) calls for an L1 pedagogy which is based on “a theory of optimality in L1 use – how and when does code-switching best lead to language learning, learning how to learn, and to the development of communication skills?”

Given that different language-learning settings may differ considerably in a number of aspects, such as teachers’ and learners’ proficiency level, motivation, class size and learners’ age, it seems problematic to produce a general, one-size-fits-all theory. Therefore, as McMillan and Rivers (2011) strongly argue, teachers should themselves decide on when, for what purposes and to what extent to employ L1, considering the immediate context of the classroom and the numerous factors that affect the teaching and learning process in that context.

A number of studies have been carried out to investigate teachers’ decisions about when, for what purposes and to what extent to use L1. Most of these studies have been carried out with older learners in universities and high schools, often in immersion programs (Bourgoin, 2014; McMillan & Turnbull, 2009; Swain & Lapkin, 2000) and second language contexts (McManus, 2015; Macaro, 2009; Scott & Fuente, 2008; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003). A substantial proportion of these studies, as Hall and Cook (2012) argue, acknowledges the existence of L1 in L2 classes, and investigates various aspects of L1 use, including the amount and functions of L1 use from both teachers’ and learners’ perspectives as well as motivation for L1 use (see, for example, Copland & Neokleous, 2011; De La Campa & Nassaji, 2009; Edstrom, 2006; Kim & Elder, 2008). There are also studies investigating very specific aspects, such as the effects of L1 use on learners’ L2 reading (Bourgoin, 2014), learners’ reactions to teachers’ L1 use in the course of teaching vocabulary (Macaro, 2009), and the relation of teachers’ language choice with their beliefs and attitudes (McMillan & Turnbull, 2009).

Considerable variation in the amount of L1 use is reported both within and across studies (between 0% and 90%). Examining one experienced and one novice tertiary level teacher’s L1 use, for example, De La Campa and Nassaji (2009) found that, while both teachers employed L1 for about 10% overall, there was a considerable difference between the lowest and highest amount of L1 use in different lessons (4.6% and 25.1%, respectively). This shows how contextual factors can affect the amount of L1 across individual lessons, something that Edstrom (2006) also

discovered. Edstrom recorded her own classes and quantified her L1 use with 15 students over the course of 24 sessions. Although she had predicted her L1 use to be around 5% to 10%, she found that she employed L1 around twice as much as her prediction, with an average of 23%. Despite relatively low amount of L1 use in most of her classes, amounts fluctuated widely across different sessions, ranging from 0% to 71%. The amount of L1 use was largely determined by the activities and learners' level, which was lower than the researcher's initial expectations. Similar variations in L1 use were also reported by Copland and Neokleous (2011) who observed four middle school teachers working in private language classes in Cyprus and found that teachers employed L1 between 0% and 53%. Although the teachers were in favour of limited L1 in L2 classes, they tended to use L1 extensively. As in Edstrom's (2006) study, there was a difference between the amount of L1 they believed they used and their actual practices. Copland and Neokleous (2011) found that teachers' language switch was mainly driven by two factors, one being affective (to create stress-free learning environment) and the other being cognitive (switching into L1 when students had difficulty in understanding). Thus, it seems that practical and contextual considerations play an important role in L1 use.

Whilst fluctuations in the amount of L1 use are reported both within and across studies, the functions of L1 use are relatively similar and consistent. The most common functions of L1 use found in a variety of research studies are giving instructions, explaining various aspects of L2 such as vocabulary and grammar, asking questions, maintaining class discipline and building rapport (Copland & Neokleous, 2011; De La Campa & Nassaji, 2009; Grim, 2010; Izquierdo et al., 2016; Sali, 2014). Some functions appear to be context-dependant, according to class variables such as students' age. Comparing the L1 use by high school and tertiary level teachers, for example, Grim (2010) found that no classroom management problem was observed with tertiary level students while it was common in high school, which led high school teachers to use L1 for this function. This also confirms that use of L1 is highly dependent on the immediate context.

All of the studies discussed above concern either higher or secondary education contexts. Despite the growing importance of YL education and the lowering of the age at which children start learning a new language in school (Garton et al., 2011), far fewer studies have been carried out in primary schools (but see Copland & Yonetsugi, 2016; Oga-Baldwin & Nakata, 2014). Copland and Yonetsugi (2016), for example, compared two native English speaker teachers' (NESTs) language use in a private primary school in Japan where one teacher could understand and use the L1 while the other could not. The results revealed that L1 use provided a valuable resource from both a sociolinguistic and pedagogic perspective. The bilingual NEST used L1 for scaffolding purposes such as checking understanding and working with what the children already knew. However, the other teacher was deprived of these opportunities due to lack of L1 knowledge, which also caused other problems such as misunderstanding learners, disregarding learners' contributions and giving up trying to understand learners. The L1 also provided advantages in supporting learners' pronunciation, meeting learners' personalised needs when the necessity occurs, better engaging them in the class (particularly less able ones) and therefore developing motivation. In this regard, L1 use provided more effective L2 teaching compared to the L2-only language classroom. Considering these benefits, the researchers suggest that the focus should be on meeting children's "social and learning needs and developing their affinity for and confidence with the L2" (Copland & Yonetsugi, 2016 p. 235) rather than simply trying to maximize L2 use to expose learners to more L2 input.

The study reported here aims to add to this body of research by furthering our understanding of L1 language use in YL classrooms. We examine YL English teachers' actual L1 practices and beliefs, investigating the functions of L1 use, and the underlying motivation to employ L1 in the teaching of English by addressing the following research questions:

1. How much L1 do YL EFL teachers use in English classes?
2. For what functions do YL EFL teachers use L1 in English classes?
3. What are the underlying reasons for L1 use with YLs in English classes?

## Research Methods

### *Setting and participants*

The study was carried out in Turkey, where the Ministry of National Education (MONE) has clear guidelines regarding the role of L1 in English classrooms in primary schools (MONE, 2018). These guidelines encourage teachers to use English as the medium of instruction as much as possible. Although not prohibiting the use of L1, the suggestion is that L1 should only be employed when necessary, for example when giving complex instructions or explaining difficult concepts. It is emphasized that “teachers are present in the classroom mainly for communicating in English” (MONE, 2018 p. 12), so L1 use should be kept at a minimum.

The data presented in this paper were collected from five different state primary schools where English is the most widely taught compulsory foreign language, starting from the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. Five EFL teachers working in different schools (pseudonyms: Seda, Esma, Betul, Melek and Ayfer) participated in the study. They are all native Turkish speakers holding BA degrees in ELT (except for one with BA in English Literature). They are all female and have various teaching experiences ranging from three (Melek) to 15 years (Esma) at different levels. Their young learners range from six to nine years old over three grades (2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grades). Each grade has two lessons (80 minutes in total) of compulsory English per week.

Data were collected through classroom observations and interviews. Each participant was observed teaching three grades over 12 lessons (four observations with each grade), which makes a total of 60 observations. Lessons were audio-recorded and field notes were taken during observations (Emerson et al., 2007). The class size ranged from 14 to 40 depending on the location of the schools (rural/urban). Each teacher was interviewed twice, once before the observations and once after (pre- and post-interviews) (see Appendix 1 for interview questions). While pre-observation interviews focused on the teachers' general views on teaching YLs, their experience and context, post-observation interviews were specifically about their language choice. The interviews were conducted in Turkish and later transcribed and translated for data analysis.

Ethics approval was obtained from both the UK university and MONE in Turkey, while informed consent was obtained from school administrations, teachers and parents/legal guardians of learners in the observed classes. It was ensured that the research was carried out considering the ethical principles of respect for learners, teachers and other stakeholders.

### *Data analysis*

In order to determine the amount and functions of L1 use, teachers' talk was broken down into utterances and analysed using Nvivo 12. In line with Izquierdo et al. (2016) and Macaro (2013), an utterance was defined as a stream of speech serving one single purpose or carrying one single message without being interrupted. Interruption here might be teachers' switching from L1/L2 or

learners' interrupting teachers. In such cases, utterances were counted separately. Repetitions in the same language were counted as one utterance.

In order to identify the functions of L1 use, a combination of *a priori* categories and an inductive approach were used. Repeated listenings to the class recordings were guided by categories identified in previous research but at the same time, new categories were also noted and previously identified categories were broken down into sub-categories. This led to a more fine-grained analysis than usually found in previous research and allowed for a more detailed and in-depth understanding of teachers' L1 practices.

However, assigning utterances to particular functional categories was a complex undertaking due to potential multi-functionality. This was addressed by assigning each utterance according to what appeared to be its primary purpose, thus each utterance was only counted once. Once the analysis was completed, an inter-rater reliability check was carried out to measure the degree of agreement (Richards, 2003) by asking a colleague of the first author, a native Turkish speaker, to code the utterances from one lesson. Consistency was 83.23% (124 out of 149 utterances were coded the same) and so the coding was deemed reliable. A total of eight major and 24 sub-categories were identified (see Table 1).

Table 1  
Functional Categories of L1 Use

Major categories	Sub-categories
Instruction	Class management
	Procedure
	Task instruction
	Homework
Confirmation/ feedback	Content feedback
	Form-focused feedback
	Echoing students' response
	Rephrasing students' response
	Teacher's comment
Asking questions	Reaction to student question/request
	Display questions
	Referential questions
	Questions related to class materials
Explanation/ paraphrase	Clarification requests
	Grammar
	Vocab
Interpersonal relations	Pronunciation
	Humour
	Chat
	Empathy/solidarity
	Affective/well being
	Encouragement
	Politeness marker
Greetings	
Discourse markers	
Talking to themselves	
Repetition/ Reinforcement	

The interviews and field notes were analysed using Nvivo 12 to carry out a thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017). Interviews and field notes helped to understand underlying reasons for L1 use and teachers' feelings and opinions about L1 use as this is not necessarily achieved by observing and recording the classes.

## Results

### *Amount of L1 use*

All the participants used L1 in their classes, but the extent to which they used it across their lessons varied greatly, from 84% in the case of Betül to 24% in the case of Seda. Similar variation was also observed across different lessons taught by the same teachers. The amount of L1 seemed to depend on specific classroom variables such as learners' mood (e.g. more L1 use for classroom management when they get bored), the focus of the lesson, and activity types. For example, although Ayfer employed an average of 69% L1 over the twelve lessons, her L1 use with the 3<sup>rd</sup> graders in the first lesson was 46%, which was almost half of the second lesson with the 4<sup>th</sup> graders (88%). The difference can be attributed to the focus of the lessons and the types of activities. She taught numbers to the 3<sup>rd</sup> graders, using elicitation and reinforcement (repeat after me in the L2) as well as a game with which learners were already familiar. On the other hand, she introduced a new game to the 4<sup>th</sup> graders related to previously taught vocabulary items, and therefore she used L1 to explain the details and give instructions, as well as to solve disciplinary issues which occurred during the activity as a result of learners' over-excitement. Moreover, while the 3<sup>rd</sup> graders played the game whilst sitting and raising their hands to speak, the 4<sup>th</sup> graders moved around, which caused more classroom management issues and more L1 use.

During the initial interviews, participants showed that they were mostly aware of the approximate amount of their L1 use. Two participants (Esma and Melek) predicted that they used L1 more than L2 in general, which was in line with the actual amount (around 62% and 81%, respectively). Although not estimating the amount, Seda stated that she endeavoured to keep the use of L1 as low as possible, but she found it impossible to avoid it completely (her actual use was 24%). On the other hand, Ayfer and Betül actually over-estimated their L1 use (80% and 90-95%, respectively).

However, while the participants were aware of their L1 use, they were generally not happy with it, expressing a preference for a reduction in L1 or even moving to an L2-only class. Like the teachers in previous studies (e.g. Copland & Neokleus, 2011; Littlewood & Yu, 2011; Macaro, 2005), they expressed a sense of guilt for employing L1, regardless of the amount, although they were also aware of a number of practical reasons, which, they argued, meant that they had little choice. For example, Esma explained:

*[I feel] Guilty [when I speak Turkish]. ... I am aware that my classes are the only opportunity for children to be exposed to English. ... However, this is what I can do.*

Melek was also disappointed with her L1 use but she went one step further by associating L1 use with being an unsuccessful language teacher:

*Speaking Turkish [in English lessons] disturbs me a lot. ... When I speak Turkish in the class, I feel like I am a Turkish or social sciences teacher. I feel that I cannot do my job properly.*

Compared to previous studies, in which teachers underestimated the actual amount of L1 they used (Copland & Neokleus, 2011; Edstrom, 2006; Liu et al., 2004), the teachers in this study had a more realistic view of their own L1 use and a certain acceptance of the practical constraints they faced, which might be due to working in the primary context. However, they showed similar feelings of guilt and inadequacy as their colleagues at higher levels.

Table 2

*Overview of L1 Use for Functional Categories*

Main categories	Sub-categories	Ayfer		Betul		Melek		Esma		Seda	
		Main %	Sub %	Main %	Sub %	Main %	Sub %	Main %	Sub %	Main %	Sub %
Instruction	Task instruction	52.7%	17.3%	52.2%	35.6%	53.4%	22.7%	51.9%	29.2%	52.6%	19.8%
	Procedure		23.8%		11.9%		18.7%		12.7%		17.2%
	Class management		10.9%		4.5%		10.4%		9.6%		14.5%
	Homework		0.7%		0.2%		1.6%		0.4%		1.0%
Confirmation/ feedback	Content feedback	23.8%	17.2%	24.8%	19.1%	20.2%	12.2%	23.3%	10.6%	15.1%	7.1%
	Form-focused feedback		0%		0%		0%		1%		0.3%
	Echoing students' response		0.8%		1.8%		2.9%		2.7%		0.3%
	Rephrasing students' response		0.3%		0.2%		0.5%		1.4%		0.1%
	Teacher's comment		1.3%		1.0%		1.6%		3.0%		3.3%
	Reaction to student question/request		4.3%		2.8%		3.1%		4.6%		4.0%
Asking questions	Display questions	12.1%	4.4%	15.6%	11.2%	16.7%	13.6%	20.2%	19.5%	20.2%	17.1%
	Referential questions		2.4%		1.2%		0.9%		0.3%		2.1%
	Questions related to class materials		3.3%		2.2%		1.5%		0.3%		1.0%
	Clarification requests		1.9%		1.1%		0.6%		0.1%		0%

\* The figures in the first column under each participant represent L1 use for main categories and the ones in the second column represent L1 use for sub-categories.

*Functions of L1 use*

The results showed that participants used L1 utterances for a variety of functions with the three main uses of L1, namely, instruction, asking questions and feedback, and these account for over 90% of the total. However, there was some variation in L1 use amongst the five teachers, particularly across the sub-categories. Table 2 shows the most common main functions with over 10% of utterances.

*L1 Use for instruction*

Instruction is the most common function of L1 utterances for all participants, with some aspect of instruction-giving accounting for over half the utterances in L1 in each case (Table 2). It seems likely that the relative frequency of L1 for task instruction is due to the learners' young age.



According to the teachers, their young learners need to be guided at every step and often need repeated instructions, hence the frequency of L1 use for instruction is higher than found in previous studies (Copland & Neokleus, 2011; De La Campa & Nassaji, 2009; Edstrom, 2006; Grim, 2010; Izquierdo et al., 2016; Sali, 2014). Grim (2010), for example, found that high school teachers sometimes used L1 for task instruction while college teachers did not use L1 at all. In the case of middle school settings in Turkey, Sali (2014) found that teachers used 14% of total L1 for instruction (third largest category for L1 use).

Reflecting on their experiences, participants in this study were aware of the differences between older and younger learners in terms of instruction. Melek expressed it as follows:

*I feel more comfortable with older students as I think I am better understood by them. However, when I give an instruction to the children, I give a few more instructions to make sure that they understand me right. In secondary school, I say it straight, just once and mostly in English. In primary school, I repeat it many times in Turkish.*

Similarly, according to Esma, younger learners needed much more guidance and instruction at every step compared to older learners, which was the main reason for her frequent instruction in L1. She also compared the cognitive abilities of younger and older learners to justify her L1 use:

*The students in secondary school try to guess. There is no such thing in primary school. It is whatever I give them, I mean I spoon-feed them.... They cannot do anything other than whatever they learn besides the instructions. There is no guessing, no ability to comment.*

Participants also used L1 to give instruction on procedures, especially concerning materials. Learners forgot to bring their lesson materials to the class (course book, activity book, notebook, and even pencils), or they did not take their materials out of their bags or the cupboards during the lesson and waited to be instructed to do so. When these instances occurred, teachers mostly dealt with them by using L1 in order to start or continue the lesson quickly. Although teachers mostly used L1 in these cases, some tried to use L2 initially, but switched to L1 due to students' lack of understanding, as in the following example from Seda's class:

*T: Write quickly! Write quickly! Take your pencil! (...) Where is your pencil? (.) Where is your pencil? Why don't you open your notebook? (.) Defterin neredde? [Where is your notebook?]*

*S1: Burada. [Here.]*

*T: Açsana! [Open it!]*

Although some studies report L1 use for procedures (De La Campa & Nassaji, 2009; Liu et al., 2004; Sali, 2014), it seems likely that this function of L1 is more common in primary classrooms as young children would tend to be less socialised into school procedures and therefore need more instruction. At the same time, a concern with 'getting on with the lesson' is likely to lead teachers to favour L1 over L2 in this case.

Classroom management is another instructional function for which participants used L1, although the frequency of this function is perhaps lower than might be expected in a primary context. Participants used both L1 and L2 to maintain discipline and the choice of language as well as the number of utterances in either language depended on teachers' attitudes towards discipline and learners' behaviours, as well as class size. For instance, in Betül's classes, which were relatively small (16-20 learners), she was observed to be very flexible about classroom management so did not often warn the learners. Moreover, the children were also well-behaved in general, so only 4% of Betül's L1 use was for classroom management.

In other classes, disciplinary issues were observed to be relatively common and were related to the learners' characteristics as children. In line with Pinter's (2017) observations, some learners were easily bored depending on type of the activity and expressed their feelings openly. In contrast, they sometimes got so excited during competitive games that the teachers had to calm them down, tending to use L1. Below is an example of learners' over-excitement and Melek's L1 use for classroom management:

*Ss: Öğretmenim ben yapayım! Ben yapayım! Ben yapayım! [Teacher, let me do it! Let me do it! Let me do it!]*

*T: Kimse bir şey yapmayacak. Sakin! Anlatmadan nasıl olacak? [No one will do it. Calm down! How will you do it if I do not explain it?]*

*Ss: Hocam! [Teacher!]*

*T: Bir anlatayım gözünü seveyim bir anlatayım! [For god's sake! Let me explain it.]*

L1 use for classroom management is undoubtedly dependant to some extent on the age and characteristics of the learners, as Grim (2010) noted. However, the relatively low level of L1 use for this function by the five teachers in this study is potentially interesting. It was observed that the teachers sometimes ignored disciplinary issues occurred during the lesson. At other times, they used L2 along with L1 depending on the importance of the case. The relatively low amount of L1 use would therefore seem to be due to a complex range of contextual and individual factors.

#### *Use for confirmation/feedback*

Confirmation/feedback is another major function for which L1 was relatively frequently employed by the participants. Several kinds of feedback were observed, including form-focused feedback, echoing or rephrasing students' responses, reacting to students' questions and commenting on students' contributions. However, the most common form of feedback was on the content of learners' contributions, indicating that the teachers' focus was on meaning rather than on form. It was observed that ample feedback was given for learners' verbal and written outputs as well as their performance during activities, games and competitions, and the most common type of content feedback used by the teachers was praising learners' correct answers.

The use of L1 for confirmation/feedback was also related to the classroom interaction patterns used by the teachers. For example, they mostly used teacher-fronted, question and answer style, which led them to confirm or give feedback on learners' answers, in a typical IRF pattern (see Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). An example is provided from one of Esma's classes with the 2<sup>nd</sup> graders:

*T: Picture' ne demek? [What does 'picture' mean?]*

*S1: Sokak. [Street.]*

*T: Hayır. Ne demek? [No. What does it mean?]*

*S2: Mahalle. [Neighbourhood.]*

*T: Hayır. Resim demek. [No, it means picture.]*

Moreover, it was observed that the way of giving feedback to learners had some effect on L1 use. Two participants (Ayfer and Betül) noticeably dealt with children individually and provided feedback to less able learners by using L1. They also checked learners' output one by one following the activities and thus their amount of L1 use for feedback was considerably higher than others.

The focus on meaning and the preference for positive reinforcement would seem to be more typical of the primary context than of higher levels, where more focus on form may be expected, although further research would be necessary to confirm this. However, the teachers in this study also had their own teaching styles, which influenced their L1 use.

#### *Use for asking questions*

The same IRF pattern noted above was used by the teachers to elicit answers from learners rather than giving explanations. Therefore, the function of asking display questions in L1 was relatively frequent in the data. However, the language preferences while asking display questions differed amongst the teachers. They sometimes used L1 directly without trying L2 first, hence the interaction continued smoothly without any communication breakdown. Here is an example from Esma's lesson with the 2<sup>nd</sup> graders:

*T: Ne soruyordu bu 'What is this?' [What is asking 'What is this?']*

*S1: Bu ne? [What is this?]*

*T: Bir tane de bunun arkadaşları vardı. O neydi? [It has a friend. What is it?]*

*Ss: That!*

*T: Arasındaki fark neydi? [What is the difference between these?]*

*Ss: Uzak, yakın! [Far, near]*

*T: Hangisi yakın? [Which one is near?]*

*Ss: This.*

At other times, the teachers instantly translated questions from L1 to L2 or vice versa. Since they did this without a pause, there was no evidence of the learners' lack of understanding of L2 use. Rather, it would seem to be due to the teacher's assumption that learners would not understand the question so they automatically switched into L1 before any communication breakdown happened. The purpose of using both languages might be to familiarize learners with particular vocabulary items by using translation. An example of instant translation is provided from Seda's lesson with the 3<sup>rd</sup> graders:

*T: What about fifth one? Beş? [Five?] (...) What about fifth one? You?*

*S1: Mother.*

*T: Yes, mother. What about sixth one? What about sixth one? You?*

*S2: Father.*

*T: Yes, father. Good.*

In some cases, the teachers tried L2 to ask questions but reverted back to L1 due to the learners' clear lack of understanding. In other cases, they repeated the questions in L2 several times before using L1 to ensure learners' understanding. Below is an example from Ayfer's lesson with the 3<sup>rd</sup> graders:

*T: This is grandfather, grandmother, father, mother, cousin. These are all my family. My family. Family?*

*Ss: (No response)*

*T: OK! Mother, father, grandmother, brother, sister. All are my family. Family?*

Ss: (No response)

T: 'Family' ne demekmiş? [What does family mean?]

Ss: Aile. [Family.]

T: Aile. Bunlar hepsi benim ailem. [Family. These are all my family.]

Interestingly, there is more evidence of teachers varying their patterns of L1 and L2 use in asking display questions than for the other functions that have been discussed so far. The fact that there is more attempt to use L2 together with the L1 may be due to what Willis (1992) termed the Inner and Outer use of language in language classrooms. The Outer structure gives the framework to the lesson and enables the lesson to 'get done', while the Inner language is the language that is the focus of the lesson, the 'main business'. Display questions are often part of this Inner language and therefore teachers may feel that combining L1 and L2 is more appropriate.

### **Motivation behind L1 use**

When asked explicitly about their motivation for using L1, the teachers identified four main reasons: students' proficiency level, target-oriented teaching, saving time and particular language points. As can be seen from Table 3, only learners' low proficiency is an influential factor in using L1 for all five teachers. Participants emphasized that they switched into L1 when children had difficulty or they thought that children would have difficulty.

Table 2  
Main Reasons for L1 Use

	Students' level of proficiency	Achieving target - curriculum	Saving time	Teaching specific points
Ayfer	+		+	
Melek	+	+	+	+
Betul	+	+	+	+
Esmâ	+	+	+	+
Seda	+			+

Esmâ argued that students' level was a determinant factor in her L1/L2 choice and she felt the need to use L1 in order not to scare or discourage students away from English because they had met English for the first time only recently:

*Language level of learners is the main reason. They are at the very beginning. Their foreign language proficiency is very low. Therefore, I must use Turkish.*

Ayfer and Melek also regarded learners' low proficiency level as discouraging them from using L2. Both teachers argued that they wanted to speak English but they could not manage it due to the difficulty students encountered, which also affected classroom environment negatively. For this reason, they lost their motivation to use L2 and switched into L1:

*Every year, I start the term with a determination to speak English but later on it dies because they do not understand. (Ayfer)*

*... before coming to class, I hope to speak English and give some instructions accordingly. However, I cannot get anything positive from the students – they stare at me blankly. (Melek)*

The majority of children in their classes only recently encountered English for the first time so it would still be challenging for them to understand it. Many were also unlikely to encounter it outside class (particularly rural areas) and so might also lack the motivation to learn. However, it does seem important to find ways to prevent the loss of good intentions of teachers like Ayfer and Melek. Immediate use of extensive L2 is unlikely to be successful with young children in these contexts, while bilingual teaching may support the gradual transition from L1 to L2.

Another reason for using L1 was the teachers' target-driven way of teaching. Three participants stated that they focused on achieving their target of teaching the allocated language points in the curriculum for each day by using either language. These targets were determined by MONE and teachers were expected to teach/finish these within the given timeframe. For this reason, they simply preferred using more L1 in class rather than using L2, which would take more time and effort. Thus, priority was given to curriculum targets, and using L2 in the class became of secondary importance. Betül justified her L1 use as determined by target-driven teaching in her interviews:

*... my aim is to teach the target topic [language item] of the day. That is all. Unfortunately, creating an atmosphere of teaching English is of secondary importance. What I want is to teach the topic and students understand it and say it in a dialogue.*

Melek also argued that L1 use was more convenient to teach the language points within the specified time period because of the time constraint, which was a big problem for her.

*... Moreover, I have a target to achieve. I only have two hours which is not enough to achieve it.*

It is apparent from the above extracts that the target-driven approach is closely related to time constraints, which was another important factor in using L1 for some participants. They emphasized that they only had two 40-minute sessions per week which was not enough to reach their targets if they wanted to use L2. Moreover, the two sessions were usually on the same day, so children encountered English once a week and often forgot what they learned from one week to the next. The teachers' response was to do a thorough revision of the previous week before moving on, thus reducing the time for the next topic and increasing the need to use L1 to move the class along.

Another reason given for using L1 was to teach particular language points. Three of the participants (Betül, Melek and Seda) stated that they employed L1 to explain details of specific language points in order to ensure that students would not misunderstand them. They argued that children's literacy and cognitive levels were low and it might be challenging to expose them to L2 with more complicated and confusing sentences, which might in turn discourage them from learning English. For this reason, they adjusted their L1/L2 use according to the difficulty of the topic of the lesson or students' familiarity with it. As Melek explained:

*My L1/L2 use is affected by students. Moreover, the difficulty of the topic that I need to teach. If it is new and difficult, I cannot use L2. I also cannot use L2 to teach the details/rules of the topic because I sometimes need to make complicated and long sentences.*

## Discussion

The results of this study show a number of similarities with previous studies, but also some important differences, which may be due to the peculiarities of the primary school setting. Our findings confirm that the use of L1 is an inseparable and important component of L2 classes (Copland & Yonetsugi, 2016; Widdowson, 2003). At this most general level, therefore, the study indicates that L1 use in primary classes is no different to higher levels (Copland & Neokleus, 2011; De La Campa & Nassaji, 2009; Edstrom, 2006) and is very common, despite the academic debates around mono- and bilingual language teaching.

In terms of the functions of L1, its use for asking questions is similar across studies, including this one (Al-Alawi, 2008; Copland & Neokleus, 2011; De La Campa & Nassaji, 2009; Sali, 2014). For example, L1 is used in display questions to increase learner engagement (De La Campa & Nassaji, 2009; Sali, 2014), for comprehension checks (De La Campa & Nassaji, 2009) and for code-switching when learners were not able to understand L2 questions (Liu et al., 2004). Therefore, L1 questioning practices appear to be similar across levels, although discourse analytical approaches, such as the one used by Copland and Yonetsugi (2016) may reveal important differences.

In other areas, there are similarities, but also potentially important differences that are revealed by the more fine-grained categories used in this study and that are likely to be attributable to the young age of the learners. In this study, teachers use L1 mainly for three major categories: instruction, feedback and asking questions, which is similar to previous studies. However, the use of L1 for instruction is more frequent in this study compared to previous work (Copland & Neokleus, 2011; De La Campa & Nassaji, 2009; Edstrom, 2006; Grim, 2010; Izquierdo et al., 2016; Sali, 2014). This is likely to be a result of the younger age of the learners whose cognitive and literacy skills are more limited than older learners. Thus, learners' young age necessitates, according to the teachers themselves, frequent and clear guidance at every step and repeated instructions which are more efficiently given in the L1. It is closely related to Pinter's (2017) argument of young learners' limited ability of reasoning and generalizing their understanding to other areas, which may result in teachers' frequent use of L1 for instruction.

The use of L1 to give feedback is also a common finding across studies (Al-Alawi, 2008; Copland & Yonetsugi, 2011; De La Campa & Nassaji, 2009; Kim & Elder, 2008; Liu et al., 2004). However, the teachers in this study were more focused on giving feedback on the content of learners' production, rather than on the form, and particularly on giving praise and encouragement. It is likely that this is as a result of the learners' young age, but there is a question over whether L1 is the most effective way of carrying out this function, or whether it could be done in the L2 or bilingually.

Where corrective feedback was given, the specific difficulties that learners had might have some role to play in teachers' use of L1. It was observed that some aspects of L2, such as writing and pronunciation, were particularly challenging for some learners. This difficulty might stem from the difference between two languages, so although teachers often did reinforcement activities in L2, they sometimes corrected learners' mistakes by using L1, at times drawing explicit attention to the contrasts.

The use of L1 for classroom management is particularly interesting. The teachers in this study differed in the way they dealt with classroom management. The tighter the control they tried to keep over the class, the more they used L1 to manage the discipline (ranging from 5% to 16%). Age is likely to be a key factor in classroom management and therefore in the use of L1 to maintain it. Grim (2010) encountered no classroom management issues in a tertiary context, while high school teachers (Grim, 2010; Kim & Elder, 2008; Liu et al., 2004) had numerous disciplinary problems so used L1 frequently for this function. Classroom management issues are even more

likely to occur with YLs due to their characteristics as children (Pinter, 2017). Cook (2001) supports managing discipline through L1 rather than L2 and argues that it is more efficient due to instant comprehension and a sign of being serious about discipline. However, if teachers are using L1 for a number of different functions, the sense of seriousness could be lost. Working towards marking a clear contrast between the use of L1 for discipline and other language use is likely to have a greater impact.

Finally, the reasons the teachers give for using L1 are, on the whole, similar to previous research. The most influential factor is learners' level and all participants emphasized that they switch into L1 when children have a difficulty or they think that children would have difficulty. Learners' low proficiency level is commonly reported in the literature as a reason for L1 use (Bruen & Kelly, 2014; Copland & Neokleus, 2011; De La Campa & Nassaji, 2009; Hall & Cook, 2012; Kim & Elder, 2008; Liu et al., 2004). However, unlike previous research, the learners in this study are YLs and most have little or no prior language learning experience, a factor that teachers take into consideration when using L1. Therefore, the teachers place greater emphasis on learners' motivation and affective needs, not wanting to cause anxiety or discourage them by too much L2 use in the beginning of their English journey. In other words, they view early stages of primary school as a transition period for familiarizing learners with English by using both L1 and L2, a point also suggested by Reilly and Ward (2003).

### **Implications and Conclusion**

This study investigated EFL teachers' L1 use with young learners. Overall, the findings suggest that there is a high variation across teachers and even between different lessons taught by the same teacher in the amount and function of L1 use. This variation depends on specific contextual factors such as focus of the lesson, activity types, learners' motivation and the need to follow the curriculum. Whilst some of these factors are likely to be global and common to teachers in many countries, many will be local, and depend on country-specific factors. Still others will depend on individual teachers and individual classrooms. Given the complexity of the factors involved and the individual variation that we found in this study, we would suggest that any attempt to identify one-size-fits-all principles for L1 use is unlikely to be useful for teachers, even if it were possible. These findings have important implications for teacher education and development.

Above all, teachers need to be made aware of their L1 use and given opportunities to reflect on it and the reasons for it, which may involve challenging teachers' current practices. Reasons for using L1, such as to give instruction in order to save time and ensure the smooth running of the lesson, given the pressure to cover the syllabus, may be sensible in the given context. Using L1 to praise children for their answers may seem less justifiable.

The teachers in this study recognised the need for a transition from L1 to L2 as the children develop familiarity with the new language. However, support for teachers in transitioning to a balance in L1 and L2 language use is not generally part of either pre-service or in-service teacher education. Moreover, the form that such a bilingual approach takes is likely to vary from context to context. Teacher education programmes can help by making teachers aware of the possibilities of both L1 and L2 use across the language functions in such a way that teachers are more able to make informed decisions and develop principles that are suitable for the context in which they find themselves and that will best contribute to learning in their classrooms.

However, this study has a number of limitations that must be recognised. First of all, this is a relatively small-scale, qualitative study in one country and is therefore not generalisable. More

studies in primary schools in different countries are needed to confirm or disprove our findings. Second, the data were collected at the beginning of the school year when 2<sup>nd</sup> graders were just starting to learn English and higher grades had just returned from long summer holidays. It would be useful to conduct a longitudinal study over the school year to investigate whether the teachers' L1 practices change as the children become more familiar with English. Finally, this study focused entirely on teachers and their perspectives. It would be important to get YLs' perspectives on L1 use and listen to their voices, actively involving them in research and getting their "unique insights", a point also emphasized by Pinter (2018).

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**Appendix 1**  
**Interview questions**  
**Pre-interview**

Topic	Questions
Opening Questions (teachers' background)	Tell me about how you became English teacher?
	What about your pre-service training?
	How did you decide to work at primary level?
Context (factual questions)	Tell me about your current context?
	What levels do you teach currently?
	How many hours do you teach English for each level (and also in total)?
	How many students are there in each class on average? (What do you think about this)?
Teachers' thoughts about teaching young learners	How does it feel to teach English to children who first meet English in your class?
	Tell me about the rewards and challenges of teaching English to young learners?
	In your opinion, what are the differences and similarities between teaching English to children from 7 to 10 ages and secondary level students from 11 to 14 ages?
Teachers' experiences	How do you prepare lessons? What are your considerations? What are the most important factors in planning a lesson for young learners?
	How do you choose the topics to teach? (What do you take into consideration?)
	Which language do you use mostly in the class? (How do you decide to use English or Turkish? What do you use Turkish for? What do you use English for?)
	What kind of activities and techniques do you use in classroom? What factors do you think most influence the way you teach? (any stakeholders such principles, families, colleagues?)
In-service training questions	What kind of activities do you do in order to improve yourself as a teacher? What factors influence you to do these activities?
Learners' experiences, attitudes and opinions	How do your students feel about learning English? (Do you think that they have prejudice against it?)
	Tell me about their experiences in learning English in the class? (Do they easily learn it or have a difficulty?)
	What do you think about students' English level when they finish primary school?
Closing question	Would you like to add anything else about your experiences, feelings, thoughts on teaching English to children?
<b>Thank you for your answers</b>	

**Post-interview**

Topic	Questions
Teachers' experiences	Which language do you think you mostly use in the classes? Turkish or English?
	How do you decide to use Turkish? What are the general reasons for using Turkish? Can you give some examples?
	Tell me about what factors affect your use of Turkish? In what ways? (stakeholders?) (What is the manner of Ministry of National Education on this issue? Do they suggest you to use either language?)
	Do you plan to speak Turkish or English in specific situations before the class or do you decide extemporally? Can you elaborate it please?
	In which grades (second, third or fourth) do you use Turkish more? What might be the reasons of this?
Teachers' feelings and attitudes	Can you talk about your feelings while using Turkish in the class? (Do you think that it is natural or something that should be avoided of?)
	In your opinion, what are the possible benefits or drawbacks of using Turkish to the students?
Training on L1 use	Have you ever had any pre-sessional or in-sessional training on the use of first language before? What about your university education?
Students' attitudes and experiences	What do students think about your use of Turkish? (Do they want you to speak Turkish or English?)
	In your opinion, do the students learn English better when you speak English or Turkish? Could you elaborate on it please?
Specific experiences of teachers	I would like to ask you some questions regarding the specific situations I have observed in your classes. In .... class, you used Turkish in this ... situation. You said ... to one of the students. Could you tell me the main reason? Does it happen frequently?
Closing question	Would you like to add anything else regarding the use of Turkish in specific or in general?
<b>Thank you for your answers and participating in this research.</b>	

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<sup>1</sup> In this article we use L1 and L2 as a convenient shorthand, fully aware of the problematic nature of these terms (see, for example, Hall & Cook, 2012). In this article, L1 refers to main language used in the context (Turkish) and L2 refers to English.