



EFL Learners' Attitudes Towards the Use of L1 in EFL Classrooms

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Abstract: The role of the first language in foreign language classrooms remains a contested issue in language pedagogy. While theoretical frameworks often discourage L1 use, growing empirical evidence points to its potential instructional value. This study explores Afghan English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' attitudes toward the use of L1 in English language instruction at Kandahar University. A quantitative research design was employed, involving a questionnaire administered to 208 undergraduate EFL students. The results indicate that students generally hold favorable attitudes toward the strategic use of L1 in the classroom. They perceive it as particularly helpful in understanding complex grammatical structures, unfamiliar vocabulary, and abstract concepts. Nonetheless, students also acknowledge that excessive reliance on L1 may hinder target language learning. Furthermore, the findings highlight that L1 use reduces students' anxiety and fosters a more supportive learning environment, especially for lower-proficiency students. Interestingly, the study found a declining preference for L1 use as students improve through academic levels from freshman to junior year. The one-way ANOVA results confirm significant differences among these groups, suggesting that as proficiency develops, students gradually shift toward an English-only policy. These findings offer valuable insights for language instructors, curriculum designers, and higher education policymakers. They emphasize the importance of adopting balanced, context-sensitive pedagogical strategies that integrate L1 judiciously to enhance comprehension while maintaining adequate exposure to the target language.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last 30 years, scholars have increasingly challenged the monolingual, English-only approach in EFL education—arguing that it often stems from ideological and political motivations rather than effective teaching methods (Anderson et al., 2024; Frontiers in Education, 2024). As a result, there has been a push to use students' native language (L1) in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. Many scholars have given the following reasons for using L1 in EFL classrooms for adult learners.

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First, learners' native language provides a basis for them to build on and comprehend the new language (Fadlalla, 2018). Saliu (2017) suggests that students' linguistic resources can be advantageous at any level of proficiency and that allowing the use of L1 in early second-language acquisition facilitates the transition to English. Second, L1 use is a preferred learning strategy for many learners. Hidayat et al. (2023) state that teachers and students frequently use translation into their first language. This idea has also been expressed by Gunawan (2020), who argues that translation is present in foreign language learning in any case and is now understood as a natural component of the process, not merely a formal method to be avoided. Third, using the first language (L1) can help overcome emotional barriers to learning a second language (L2). Several studies have shown that using L1 in the classroom can reduce language anxiety and create a positive learning environment for L2 acquisition (Siti Hawa et al., 2023). Fourth, the first language (L1) can be utilized as a means of thinking. According to Vygotsky (1986), L1 can naturally aid students in comprehending and interpreting L2 texts by mediating their thinking about the structures, content, and meaning of the texts.

The use of L1 in teaching and learning aims to improve the efficiency of second language acquisition. In language classrooms, L1 has been utilized for various purposes such as giving instructions (Hidayat et al. (2023; Sundari & Febriyanti (2023; Siti Hawa et al. 2023), checking comprehension, explaining grammar (Macaro et al. 2022), establishing rapport with students (Macaro, Arcos & Molway, 2022), providing feedback (Ellis, 2009; Brooks-Lewis, 2009), promoting cooperation among learners (Turnbull, and Dailey-O'Cain, 2009), and maintaining discipline in the classroom (Aybirdi, Han & Şahin (2023; Siti Hawa et al., 2023. However, the majority of the literature on this topic suggests that a limited, controlled use of L1 can lead to effective and efficient English language teaching and learning (Macaro, Arcos & Molway, 2022; Nation, 2003). In this regard, Ellis (2005) suggests that "the more students are exposed to English, the more quickly they will learn," and in order to teach it, they need to be "forced to use it." Turnbull and Arnett (2002) argue that overusing the first language (L1) in the classroom can limit students' exposure to the target language (L2), which is crucial for language acquisition, as "every second spent in L1 is a second not spent in English."

English is used as a foreign language in Afghanistan (Orfan, 2020). It is used for studying abroad, connecting with people outside the country, providing translation and interpretation services, and interacting in social networks (Rahmany and Sohail, 2021). Afghanistan falls within the expanding circle of Kachru's model (1988, p. 12), where English is recognized as a foreign language. In this context, English is primarily a performance variety rather than an institutionalized one. However, in 2012, former President Hamid Karzai proposed using English as the medium of instruction in the Engineering and Medical faculties (Afghanpaper, 2012).

The government of Afghanistan has made English a compulsory subject in schools (Ahmad, 2016), where Pashto and Persian serve as the primary languages of instruction (L1). However, the medium of instruction in higher education is English in the departments of English Language and Literature (Orfan, 2020). Students in tertiary-level classes repeatedly

ask lecturers to explain topics in L1. According to Noori and Rasoly (2017), a lecturer stated that the primary reason for code-switching was students' insistence on using L1. This is because the department follows an English-only policy, which is prescribed in the curriculum (Ministry of Higher Education, 2017). At the tertiary level of EFL in Afghanistan, the problem lies in allowing L1 in the classroom as a means of instruction. Furthermore, Paker and Karaagaç state that "Having various educational backgrounds, most lecturers are uneasy about the use of L1 in the classes and cannot decide whether it is a good idea to use it or not, or if it is going to be used, when, why, and for what purposes (2015, p. 112)."

In the context of Afghan EFL classrooms, such studies are rarely seen. Thus, the topic is of great importance to study from different perspectives. Additionally, with the help of this research, Afghan English language lecturers can decide whether to permit the use of L1. Furthermore, as learners are important stakeholders in the learning process, their attitudes will also be reflected in the study. Finally, if any, the areas where L1 is needed for explanation will be identified. Overall, the findings of the present research will be most helpful to policymakers, lecturers, and institutions for revising and developing relevant policies in the context of Afghan EFL classrooms.

Therefore, this study is guided by the following three research questions:

- What are EFL students' attitudes towards the use of L1 in EFL classrooms?
- What situations is L1 used for in the classroom?

Is there any significant difference among freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior students' attitudes towards the use of L1?

RESEARCH METHOD

Study Design

This research is based on a survey design employing a quantitative approach. According to Johnson (1992), "The survey method is used by second language, bilingual education, and foreign language researchers to study a wide variety of issues that impinge on language learning" (p. 105). Following this approach, the survey method was used to collect data from tertiary EFL students at Kandahar University.

Population and Participants

The population for this study comprised undergraduate EFL students enrolled at Kandahar University, Afghanistan. The total number of EFL students at the university was 227. Using the SurveyMonkey sample size calculator with a 95% confidence level and a 2% margin of error, 208 active participants completed the questionnaires. By entering their names at the beginning of the questionnaire, they agree to participate in the study.

Instrument of the Study

To address the research questions, a questionnaire was adopted from Gaebler's (2014) study. Some necessary modifications were made to adapt it to the Afghan EFL context—the

reference to L1 as Arabic was changed to Pashto and Persian. Additionally, 10 new items were added to collect data for answering research question 2. The first section of the instrument collects demographic information, including gender, age, and class, while the second section contains 10 multiple-choice questions.

Furthermore, 10 additional statements were included in the questionnaire to help answer the second research question in the current study. These items are five-point Likert scale statements regarding the usefulness of L1 in improving L2 skills. The questionnaire consists of 22 items in total.

Pilot Study

A small-scale pilot study was conducted to assess the questionnaire's reliability and validity. Accordingly, it was distributed to 50 students. Using SPSS, the researcher confirmed that the questionnaire was both reliable and valid.

Reliability and Validity

The internal reliability of the 10 items I added to the questionnaire was calculated using Cronbach's alpha. The reliability coefficient was 0.81, indicating that it was suitable for the study's purposes. The content validity of the questionnaire was ensured through consultation with experts in language education and by adapting items from established studies to the specific context of Afghan EFL learners.

Table 1. *Cronbach Alpha*

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N. of Items
.807	10

Data Collection and Data Analysis

The researchers collected data for the study using an online questionnaire created with Google Forms. The link to the form was distributed to students via classroom WhatsApp groups. Only properly completed questionnaires that included the students' consent were considered for analysis. After data collection, 208 fully completed responses were selected for analysis.

In addition, the researcher sent follow-up texts to the groups to complete the survey questionnaire. Finally, a third reminder was sent on November 22 to ensure that all prospective participants had a full month to complete the survey. The data collection process lasted for one month (November 2024), and the researcher closed the survey on the specified date (November 29, 2024). The researcher subsequently downloaded the data into an Excel spreadsheet after the submissions were completed. Finally, the data were exported to Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 20 for further quantitative analysis.

For quantitative data analysis, SPSS version 20 was used. To achieve the study's objectives, descriptive statistics, including frequency, percentage, mean, and standard

deviation, and inferential statistics, such as one-way ANOVA, were used to analyze the students' responses.

The first step in the statistical analysis was to prepare the data. With this in mind, the researcher organized and coded the data for analysis. The researcher subsequently searched for missing data. Data cleansing improves data quality, helping ensure data are prepared for analysis (Ridzuan & Zainon, 2019).

Ethical Issues

Prior to distributing the questionnaire, the researchers obtained permission from both the faculty and the department. Students were informed about the study's purpose and provided consent after a brief introduction to the survey. Furthermore, by entering their email addresses in the online Google Form, all participants confirmed their agreement to take part in the study.

FINDINGS

This section presents the study's findings in response to the three research questions. The results are organized to explore students' attitudes toward the use of L1 in EFL classrooms, the situations in which L1 is employed, and differences in attitudes across academic levels. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data. Tables and figures are included to illustrate key patterns. The findings provide insight into the role of L1 in the Afghan tertiary EFL context.

Table 2. *Age*

Age Group	18-21	22-25	26-29	Total
Freshman	49	6	0	55 26.44%
Junior	25	24	1	50 24.04%
Senior	14	26	2	42 20.19%
Sophomore	28	32	1	61 29.33%
Total	116 55.8%	88 42.3%	4 1.9%	208 100%

Students Attitudes

Table 3 presents the responses to Question 1, which asked: "Should the first language (L1) be used in the English classroom?"

Table 3. *Should L1 be used in the English Classroom?*

	Yes		No	
	Count	Row N %	Count	Row N %
Freshman	46	83.6%	9	16.4%
Sophomore	37	60.7%	24	39.3%
Junior	29	58.0%	21	42.0%
Senior	29	69.0%	13	31.0%
Total	141	67.8%	67	32.2%

Among the students (83.6% of first-year students, 60.7% of sophomores, 58.0% of juniors, and 69.0% of seniors) agreed, while (16.4% of freshmen, 39.3% of sophomore, 42.0% of juniors, and 31.0% of seniors) opposed the use of L1 in the classroom.

Table 4. *Lecturer Use of Pashto and Persian*

	Frequency	Percent
Never	15	7.2%
Rarely	44	21.2%
Sometimes	138	66.3%
Frequently	11	5.3%
Total	208	100.0%

Question 2 was "How often should your lecturer use L1 in the class?". As shown in Table 4 above, 5.3% of the students stated that lecturers should frequently use Pashto and Persian, while 66.3% stated that lecturers should sometimes use Pashto and Persian. Additionally, 21.2% of the students felt that lecturers should rarely use Pashto and Persian, and 7.2% believed that lecturers should never use them.

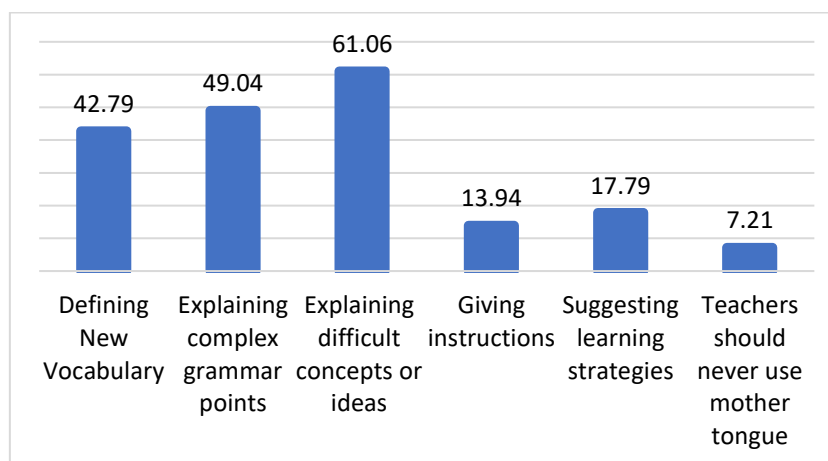


Figure 1. *Situations for Using L1*

Figure 1 illustrates responses to Question 3, which asked students when they consider it appropriate for their lecturer to use the first language (L1) in the classroom. Here, 42.79% of the students relied on L1 in defining new vocabulary; 49.04% of the students relied on it when explaining complex grammar points; 61.06% of the students relied on it when explaining complex concepts or ideas; While, only 17.79% of the students see using L1 appropriate when suggesting learning strategies, and just 13.94% of the students see it appropriate when giving instructions. Moreover, only 7.21% of students think it is appropriate for lecturers never to use L1 in class

Table 5. *How Often Should Your Classmates Use L1 in the Class*

	Frequency	Percent
Never	26	12.5%
Rarely	64	30.8%
Sometimes	95	45.7%
Frequently	23	11.1%
Total	208	100.0%

Table 5 presents the responses to Question 4, which asked: “How often should your classmates use the first language (L1) in class?”. 11.1% of the students stated that their classmates should frequently use Pashto and Persian, while 45.7% said that their classmates should sometimes use them. Additionally, 30.8% of the students believed that their classmates should rarely use Pashto and Persian, and 12.55% believed that their classmates should never use Pashto and Persian.

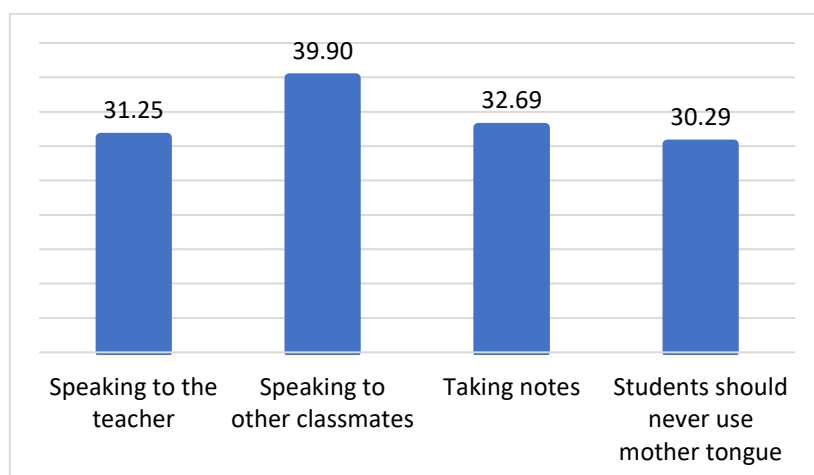


Figure 2. *The Use of L1 by Classmates*

As depicted in figure 2 above, 31.25% of the students think that using L1 is appropriate when speaking to the lecturer; 39.90% of them believe that it is appropriate to use it when speaking to other classmates; 32.69% of the students think that their classmates should use L1 when taking notes; while, 30.29% of the students believe that their classmates should never use L1 in the classroom.

Table 6. *Does L1 Help in Learning English?*

	Frequency	Percent
No	32	15.4%
A little	74	35.6%
A fair amount	37	17.8%
A lot	65	31.3%
Total	208	100.0%

Question 6 asked: “Do you think the use of the first language (L1) in the classroom helps you learn English?”. Based on Table 6 above, 31.3% of the students confirmed that using L1 helps them a lot in learning English. Additionally, 17.8% of the students confirmed that using L1 helps them learn English reasonably well. Furthermore, 35.6% of the students confirmed that using L1 helps them a little in learning English. Lastly, 15.4% of the students confirmed that using L1 doesn't help them learn English at all.

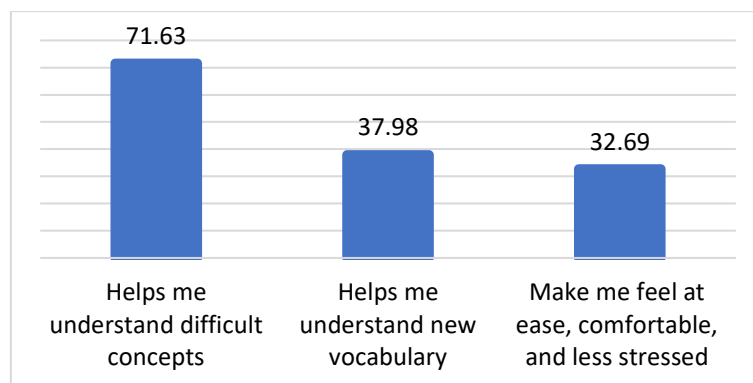


Figure 3. Helpfulness of the L1 Use

Figure 3 above illustrates why using L1 is helpful. 32.69% of the students say that using L1 makes them feel at ease, comfortable, and less stressed. Additionally, 37.98% of students say that using L1 helps them understand new vocabulary, while 71.63% say it helps them understand complex concepts.

Table 7. Does L1 Prevent Learning English?

	Frequency	Percent
No	54	26.0%
A little	80	38.5%
A fair amount	24	11.5%
A lot	50	24.0%
Total	208	100.0%

Question 9 asked: "Do you think the use of the first language (L1) in the classroom prevents you from learning English?". Based on Table 7 above, 26.0% of the students stated that using their L1 does not prevent them from learning English. Meanwhile, 38.5% of the students said that using L1 slightly hinders their ability to learn English. Additionally, 11.5% of the students reported that using L1 moderately prevents them from learning English, while 24.0% reported that using L1 greatly impedes their progress in learning English.

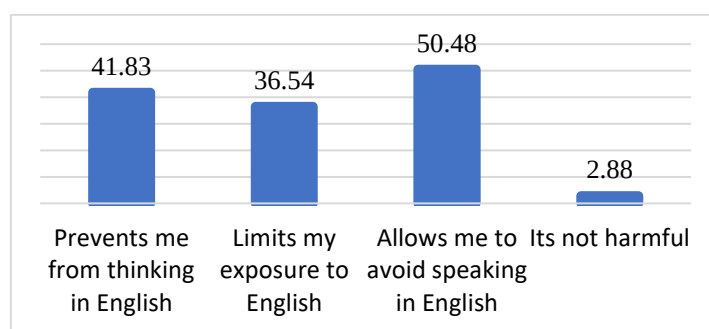


Figure 4. Harmfulness of using L1

Figure 4 above illustrates why using L1 is harmful. Only 2.88% of the students believe that using L1 is not harmful, while 50.48% of the students prefer to use L1 to avoid speaking English. Additionally, 36.54% of the students feel that using L1 limits their exposure to English, and 41.83% think that using L1 prevents them from thinking in English.

Areas Where L1 is Useful**Table 8.** *Usefulness of L1 in EFL Classroom*

No	Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1.	The use of L1 is useful to introduce new material.	13 6.2%	27 13.0%	39 18.8%	91 43.8%	38 18.3%
2.	The use of L1 is useful in testing.	26 12.5%	48 23.1%	50 24.0%	58 27.9%	26 12.5%
3.	The use of L1 is useful for checking for comprehension.	14 6.7%	28 13.5%	43 20.7%	85 40.9%	38 18.3%
4.	The use of L1 is useful in reading course.	33 15.9%	56 26.9%	41 19.7%	51 24.5%	27 13.0%
5.	The use of L1 is useful in writing course.	40 19.2%	55 26.4%	41 19.7%	51 24.5%	21 10.1%
6.	The use of L1 is useful in listening course.	45 21.6%	57 27.4%	35 16.8%	49 23.6%	22 10.6%
7.	The use of L1 is useful in speaking course.	54 26.0%	55 26.4%	28 13.5%	52 25.0%	19 9.1%
8.	The use of L1 helps conduct small-group work.	18 8.7%	41 19.7%	63 30.3%	72 34.6%	14 6.7%
9.	Using L1 is useful for giving feedback.	16 7.7%	41 19.7%	42 20.2%	86 41.3%	23 11.1%
10.	The use of L1 is useful for giving instructions.	15 7.2%	33 15.9%	29 13.9%	93 44.7%	38 18.3%
11.	The use of L1 can help me feel more comfortable and confident.	17 8.2%	31 14.9%	39 18.8%	89 42.8%	32 15.4%
12.	The use of L1 helps me express my feelings and ideas that I cannot express in English.	11 5.3%	16 7.7%	29 13.9%	96 46.2%	56 26.9%

In this section, 12 items assess students' level of acceptance of the use of L1 in EFL classrooms. This level is measured using a five-point Likert-scale questionnaire. In Table 8, the top two items that students agreed with and strongly agreed with are the twelfth and tenth items. The twelfth item states, "The use of L1 helps me express my feelings and ideas that I can't express in English," with 73.10% of the students agreeing, 13.00% disagreeing, and 13.90% remaining neutral in Table 8. The tenth item indicates, "The use of L1 is useful for giving instructions," with 63.00% of the students agreeing, 23.10% disagreeing, and 13.90% remaining neutral.

On the other hand, the bottom two items students strongly agreed with are the sixth and seventh items. The sixth item, "The use of L1 is useful in listening courses," indicates that 34.20% of the students agreed, while 49.00% disagreed, and 16.80% remained neutral. The seventh item states, "The use of L1 is useful in speaking courses." It shows that only 34.10%

of the students agreed, while a majority (52.40%) disagreed, and a small percentage (13.50%) remained neutral.

Comparison of Students' Attitudes Based on Class Level

This section presents a comparison of freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior students' attitudes toward the use of L1 in the EFL classroom, with class level as the dependent variable. A one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine whether there were significant differences in L1 frequency across class levels.

Table 9. *Students' Preferences for L1 Use*

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	2.177	3	.726	3.424	.018
Within Groups	43.241	204	.212		
Total	45.418	207			

ANOVA analysis, in Table 9 above, indicates that there is a significant difference among freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior EFL learners in the use of L1 ($f(3, 204) = 3.424$ & $p = 0.18$).

Table 10. *Post-hoc (Tukey's HSD)*

(I) Class	(J) Class	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.
Freshman	Sophomore	-.230*	.086	.039
	Junior	-.256*	.090	.025
	Senior	-.146	.094	.412
Sophomore	Freshman	.230*	.086	.039
	Junior	-.027	.088	.990
	Senior	.084	.092	.800
Junior	Freshman	.256*	.090	.025
	Sophomore	.027	.088	.990
	Senior	.110	.096	.661
Senior	Freshman	.146	.094	.412
	Sophomore	-.084	.092	.800
	Junior	-.110	.096	.661

To identify where the difference lay among the class groups, a Post Hoc test was conducted. The analysis shows that significant differences were found between Freshman and Junior (mean difference = 0.2564, $p = 0.0247$) and between Freshman and Sophomore (mean difference = 0.2298, $p = 0.039$). However, no significant differences were found between other class pairs.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of Afghan EFL learners' perceptions regarding the use of their L1 in EFL classrooms. The discussion addresses the three research questions sequentially.

The first research question explored students' attitudes toward the use of L1 in EFL classrooms. The findings revealed that the majority of students held positive attitudes toward L1 use. They supported the occasional use of their mother tongue by both lecturers and classmates. This finding aligns with previous research, such as that of Mahmutoğlu and Kıcı (2013), who similarly observed favorable student perceptions of L1 use in the EFL context. However, contrasting evidence exists. For instance, Tareen (2022) reported that participants in his study viewed L1 use negatively, suggesting that it could lead to a decline in learners' English language proficiency. Despite this, students in the current study emphasized the benefits of L1 when used strategically—for translation, for delivering instructions, for contrasting linguistic features, and for explaining grammar points.

The second research question focused on the specific situations in which L1 is used in the EFL classroom. Students reported that L1 was particularly helpful in clarifying difficult concepts, explaining complex grammar rules, introducing new vocabulary, and creating a more comfortable and less stressful learning environment. They also indicated that when students do not understand, lecturers should resort to the L1 to ensure clarity. These findings are consistent with those of Narasuman et al. (2019), who found that lecturers used code-switching in similar contexts, especially when addressing cultural issues, explaining grammar and new vocabulary, and giving clear instructions. From a theoretical perspective, Krashen's (1981) Input Hypothesis supports the use of comprehensible input in language learning; thus, limited use of L1 can be beneficial for lower-proficiency learners. This viewpoint is also echoed in Nation's (2003) suggestion that L1 use can support learners who have not yet developed sufficient English language competence.

Furthermore, participants in the current study noted that L1 was most useful for delivering instructions. Similarly, Rasoly and Noori (2017) reported that lecturers often code-switched to enhance comprehension and optimize the instructional process.

Interestingly, students in this study did not find L1 use beneficial in developing the four core language skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. This finding contrasts with the studies by Nazary (2008) and Jukil and Hasan (2016), in which participants expressed positive views of L1 use in skill-based instruction. In those studies, students believed that using L1 in activities such as introducing new material, checking comprehension, and expressing emotions supported L2 acquisition more effectively.

The third research question examined whether students' attitudes toward L1 use differed by class level. The results indicated a significant difference among students from different academic years. First-year students were notably more supportive of L1 use in the classroom, while upper-level students—particularly juniors—were more inclined toward English-only instruction. This trend suggests a gradual shift away from reliance on the mother tongue as students gain proficiency, although the pattern is not strictly linear.

These results mirror those of studies by Nazary (2008) and Jukil and Hasan (2016), which also found increased acceptance of English-only instruction at higher academic levels.

However, Ray (2015) maintained that the use of code-switching and the native language remains beneficial, even for students with higher proficiency levels.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore the attitudes of Afghan undergraduate students toward the use of L1 in EFL classrooms. The findings from the first research question indicate that the majority of students hold positive attitudes towards the use of L1 in EFL classrooms. They emphasized that if students are unable to comprehend, lecturers should explain the subject matter in L1. While they support the use of English, they do not disregard the potential benefits of using L1. They had positive attitudes towards both lecturers' and students' use of L1. The students indicated that the use of L1 by lecturers can help them understand difficult concepts or ideas, comprehend complex grammar points, and learn the meaning of new vocabulary. Similarly, they preferred to use L1 when speaking with their classmates and their lecturer. When students struggle to comprehend the lecturer's instructions, L1 can act as a mediator, making them feel at ease.

Additionally, the class level of EFL students also played a key role in their preference for using L1. Students with lower English proficiency, especially freshmen, needed to use L1 frequently in several situations. On the other hand, students with higher English proficiency showed a lower desire to use their L1, although they still considered it helpful. Finally, the valuable contributions of L1 cannot be ignored. It can serve as a mediating tool when used appropriately. As previously mentioned, lecturers must be cautious in promoting the use of L2 and motivate students to use it in the classroom. Additionally, lecturers should support students' L2 learning by using effective teaching methods and techniques.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors of this research paper declare that there are no conflicts of interest associated with this publication.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Abdul Bari Rahmany served as the primary author and was chiefly responsible for developing the Introduction, Literature Review, Data Analysis, and Discussion sections of the manuscript. Sayed Abas Hashimi and Nasir Ahmad Tayid were jointly responsible for developing the Methodology section, including designing the research questionnaire, creating the online Google Form, collecting the data, and converting it into SPSS format for analysis. Fazal Rahmany Sohail contributed by writing the Abstract, Conclusion, and References, and also conducted thorough proofreading of the entire manuscript. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript prior to submission.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available upon reasonable request to all relevant bodies and stakeholders involved in higher education in Afghanistan. Requests for access to the data can be directed to the corresponding author.

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