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Reconsidering Mother Tongue Use in EFL Classrooms: Kurdish learners' experiences and teachers' perspectives

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Abstract - This study explores the role of the mother tongue in English language classrooms by examining the experiences of Kurdish learners and the perspectives of their teachers at Gasha Educational Community. It investigates why students use Kurdish during English lessons and how this practice affects learning outcomes. A qualitative design was employed using semi-structured interviews with 16 students (Grades 4–7) and three English teachers. Findings indicate that Kurdish aids comprehension, reduces anxiety, and reinforces cultural identity, yet overreliance may limit English proficiency. Both learners and teachers emphasized the importance of a balanced approach, where Kurdish scaffolds learning while English remains the primary instructional language. The study highlights the value of culturally responsive pedagogies that recognize learners' linguistic backgrounds and enhance effectiveness in EFL classrooms.

Keywords: mother tongue use; EFL classrooms; Kurdish learners; teacher perspectives; classroom practices; multilingual education

1. Introduction

The use of the mother tongue or first language (L1) in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms remains a controversial topic, with ongoing debates over when and how it should be used effectively. Learning EFL differs significantly from learning English as a Second Language (ESL), as students in EFL contexts generally lack natural exposure to English outside the classroom. In countries where English is taught as a foreign language, learners often face limited opportunities to practice it in daily life, relying almost exclusively on classroom interaction (Adekola et al., 2018). Some scholars argue that maximizing the use of English in the classroom significantly enhances students' exposure, thereby facilitating the development of interlanguage and communicative competence (Semiun et al., 2014). By incorporating authentic English input, teachers can foster confidence, fluency, and a more meaningful connection between classroom learning and real-life language use.

Nevertheless, research has also shown that reliance on the mother tongue can be both supportive and detrimental. Zhao (2019) highlighted negative transfer effects, such as the misuse of plural forms, inappropriate lexical collocations, and literal translations, which often slow down learners' progress. Overdependence on L1 may prevent students from internalizing target language structures. Conversely, several studies argue that using the mother tongue strategically

can support comprehension, reduce anxiety, and allow learners to engage more meaningfully in classroom tasks (Khatai, 2011). This indicates that the question is not whether to use L1, but rather how, when, and to what extent.

In the context of the Kurdistan Region, particularly in private schools in Sulaimani, English is often the first foreign language taught. Students are expected to use English primarily in classrooms, while outside, opportunities for authentic communication remain limited. This creates challenges for students in sustaining consistent practice and interaction in English. Moreover, the teacher's methodology and attitude toward L1 use play a crucial role in shaping the classroom environment and influencing learners' willingness to engage in English. The interplay between teachers' practices and students' preferences illustrates the need to consider both perspectives when examining the role of the mother tongue in EFL education.

This study, therefore, investigates not only students' perceptions but also teachers' insights regarding L1 use in English classrooms. Students' voices shed light on their motivations, challenges, and preferences for employing the mother tongue, while teachers' perspectives reveal how pedagogical choices either encourage or discourage its use. Understanding this dynamic provides a more comprehensive picture of how L1 functions within the learning process, highlighting both its facilitative role and potential drawbacks.

The debate surrounding whether teachers should use students' native language when teaching a foreign language has persisted for decades. Proponents argue that the mother tongue provides essential scaffolding for learners, particularly younger students or beginners, as it aids comprehension, reduces anxiety, and builds confidence. Opponents, however, insist that immersion in the target language is the most effective method, as it ensures maximum exposure, fosters fluency, and builds cultural understanding.

In Kurdistan, English is taught as a foreign language in most schools, both public and private. However, unlike contexts where English functions as a second language, students in Kurdistan rarely encounter English outside of school. This creates an environment where opportunities for meaningful practice are limited. For many learners, English is confined to academic settings, making their mother tongue (Kurdish) the default mode of communication outside class. This situation influences not only student progress but also teacher strategies, as instructors must decide whether to rely on Kurdish for explanations or to insist on English-only interactions.

Research suggests that students' gender, age, and motivation can also shape their engagement with English. For instance, Akdamar and Sütçü (2021) found that female students in Kurdistan demonstrated a more positive attitude toward learning English than male students, often linking it to future opportunities for study or employment. Similarly, Mikael & Muhammed (2023), in their study at Duhok University, demonstrated that Kurdish students' reliance on their mother tongue could both challenge and support their EFL learning. While mother-tongue interference often complicated grammar and vocabulary acquisition, it also provided learners with a unique lens to compare linguistic structures and cultural meanings across languages.

At the classroom level, teachers also recognize these dualities. Samingan (2016) emphasized that learners need to develop accuracy, fluency, and clarity, but the structural differences between Kurdish and English often result in persistent errors. Yusuf et al. (2021) similarly observed that grammatical differences between L1 and L2 play a significant role in shaping student errors. For EFL learners in Kurdistan, the challenge lies in balancing the supportive role of Kurdish with the necessity of practicing English consistently to achieve long-term fluency.

The role of the mother tongue in foreign language acquisition is complex, as it can both facilitate and hinder learning. On one hand, learning through the mother tongue promotes cognitive development and supports emotional security. Yusuf (2009) argued that education in the first language is faster, more effective, and more profound, enabling learners to build strong conceptual frameworks that can transfer across languages. Similarly, Noormohamadi (2008) highlighted how the mother tongue aids in the development of cognitive and intellectual capacities that support lifelong learning.



In the EFL context, the mother tongue can function as a bridge for learners. Silvani (2014) emphasized that when used strategically, the mother tongue can speed up the acquisition process, enabling students to grasp complex ideas more efficiently. This is particularly useful in group discussions, where the mother tongue facilitates communication, exchange of ideas, and shared meaning-making. Kasim et al. (2019) also noted that L1 can provide a valuable tool for clarifying instructions, reducing misunderstandings, and supporting pronunciation practice.

However, excessive reliance on the mother tongue may reduce opportunities for immersion and hinder the natural acquisition of English. Overuse of Kurdish, for example, may discourage learners from thinking directly in English, reinforcing habits of constant translation. This slows down the process of achieving fluency and may undermine students' confidence in their ability to communicate spontaneously in English (Yusuf et al., 2021). In writing tasks, L1 transfer is particularly evident, with students often applying Kurdish syntactic or lexical patterns incorrectly in English. As a result, while the mother tongue provides emotional and cognitive support, it may also create long-term challenges if not carefully managed by teachers.

Several studies have explored the use of the mother tongue in EFL classrooms across different contexts, offering insights into both student and teacher perspectives. Sa'd and Qadermazi (2015) studied sixty-second language learners in Iran and found that students strongly preferred using their L1. Their findings suggested that limited, strategic use of the mother tongue—particularly for explaining instructions or complex concepts—was more effective than either banning it entirely or relying on it too heavily.

In contrast, Resmini (2019) reported negative student perceptions of L1 use in English classrooms, with many preferring that teachers deliver instruction exclusively in English. However, despite these attitudes, participants still acknowledged the practical benefits of using L1 for clarification when faced with difficult content.

Teachers' perspectives are equally important. Yuvayapan (2019) surveyed teachers in Turkey and found that 58% supported the use of the mother tongue in classrooms, while 42% opposed it. Teachers who supported it often cited its usefulness in including lower-proficiency students and encouraging participation. On-task applications, such as clarifying instructions and supporting struggling learners, were the most commonly reported benefits.

Other studies highlight the realities of bilingual classroom practices. Brevik and Rindal (2020), for instance, observed sixty EFL lessons in Norway and found that while English dominated classroom interactions (77% of the time), the mother tongue was still used for 16% of exchanges, particularly in moments requiring clarification or discipline. Similarly, Beers Fagersten (2012) observed Swedish EFL classrooms where English was the expected medium of instruction, but students nonetheless relied on Swedish occasionally to maintain comfort and comprehension.

More recently, Kallkvist et al. (2022) explored translanguaging strategies among multilingual students in Sweden. Their interviews revealed that learners strategically used different languages—including Arabic, Kurmanji, and Sorani—depending on the task, their proficiency level, and the context. Importantly, students reported that teacher use of the local language (Swedish) helped them connect vocabulary across languages and compare linguistic structures, showing that teacher practices directly shaped students' engagement with multiple languages.

Taken together, these studies emphasize that both student preferences and teacher strategies must be considered in evaluating the role of the mother tongue in EFL education. The evidence suggests that a balanced, context-sensitive approach is most effective, where L1 is neither overused nor prohibited but employed strategically to support learning.

In light of the preceding discussion, this research aims to explore the reasons and contexts for L1 use among Kurdish students and their teachers in EFL classrooms at Gasha Educational Community. Accordingly, the following research questions were formulated: (1). How does the use of the mother tongue affect students' English language learning? (2). In what situations do students prefer to use their mother tongue in EFL classrooms, and why? (3). What are teachers' attitudes and practices regarding the use of the mother tongue in their English classrooms?

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore how Kurdish students and teachers perceive and experience the use of the mother tongue in English language classrooms. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for in-depth exploration of personal experiences, classroom dynamics, and individual attitudes that may not be captured through quantitative methods. By focusing on narratives, the study seeks to uncover the complex relationship between language use, learning, and identity in EFL contexts.

2.2 Participants

The participants consisted of two groups: Students: Sixteen Kurdish students from the Gasha Educational Community, ranging from Grade 4 to Grade 7 (ages 10–13). The sample was intentionally diverse across grade levels to capture differences in language use as proficiency develops over time.

Teachers: Three English language teachers at the same institution, each with several years of experience teaching EFL in Kurdistan. Teachers were included to provide professional insights into the pedagogical considerations of using the mother tongue in English classrooms. This dual sample ensured that both learner experiences and teacher practices were represented, offering a more comprehensive perspective on the issue.

2.3 Data Collection

Data was collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews.

Student Interviews: Conducted individually, focusing on students' preferences, challenges, and experiences with using Kurdish in English lessons. Questions were designed to explore situations where students relied on their mother tongue and how they perceived its impact on their learning.

Teacher Interviews: Semi-structured interviews with teachers investigated their strategies, beliefs, and classroom policies regarding L1 use. Teachers were asked about both the benefits and drawbacks of allowing Kurdish in their classrooms, as well as how they manage student reliance on it. Observations: Classroom observations were conducted to triangulate interview findings, allowing the researcher to examine how students and teachers actually used language in practice.

2.4 Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed and thematically analyzed. Themes were generated inductively, focusing on recurring patterns across both student and teacher responses. For students, themes included mother tongue as a learning aid, overreliance as a barrier, confidence and comfort, cultural identity, and teacher influence. For teachers, themes included facilitative use of L1, the risk of dependency, and balancing exposure with support.

The combination of student and teacher perspectives provided a richer understanding of how mother tongue use operates in EFL classrooms, highlighting both tensions and synergies in their experiences. Instruments and coding frameworks from previous studies (e.g., Sa'd & Qadermazi, 2015; Yuvayapan, 2019) were adapted and refined to ensure accuracy and reliability in analyzing the data.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

Table 1: Mother Tongue as a Learning Aid

Participant	Grade	Student Quote	Explanation
P1	4	"When the teacher gives us new words, sometimes they are too difficult. I ask my desk partner in Kurdish, and he explains. It helps me to keep up and not fall behind."	Kurdish is used as peer support to clarify difficult vocabulary.
P4	5	"If I do not know how to say something in English, I say it in Kurdish first. Then the teacher tells me the English word. This way I learn step by step."	Kurdish acts as a bridge to scaffold new English knowledge.



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P9	6	"When we learn grammar rules, I compare them with Kurdish grammar in my head. It makes it easier for me to understand quickly."	L1 helps with metalinguistic awareness and comparison.
P14	7	"When I am stuck, I think in Kurdish first. Then I try to translate into English. Without Kurdish, it is like building without tools."	L1 functions as a cognitive tool in learning English.

Table 2: Over-reliance on L1 as a Barrier

Participant	Grade	Student Quote	Explanation
P2	4	"I know it is good to practice English, but I often talk to my friends in Kurdish. Later, I see that I am using less English than I should."	Overuse of L1 reduces exposure to English.
P8	5	"Sometimes I depend too much on Kurdish. For example, when the teacher asks me in English, I quickly reply in Kurdish because it is easier."	Reliance on Kurdish prevents English practice.
P13	7	"If everyone in the class uses Kurdish, we will never improve in English. I want to practice more English, but sometimes it is hard when my friends switch."	Peer influence reinforces L1 overuse.
P16	6	"I feel lazy when I can explain things in Kurdish. It stops me from challenging myself to find the English words."	L1 use creates avoidance of linguistic effort.

Table 3: Confidence and Classroom Comfort

Participant	Grade	Student Quote	Explanation
P3	4	"Speaking English in front of the whole class makes me shy. But if I can use Kurdish first, I feel less nervous, and then I try English."	L1 lowers anxiety and builds confidence.
P7	5	"When I make mistakes in English, I feel embarrassed. But if I say the idea in Kurdish, I feel better because my classmates understand me."	Kurdish provides emotional security in class.
P11	6	"The teacher sometimes says, 'Don't worry, you can use Kurdish if you want.' This makes the classroom feel safe. Later, I try again in English."	The teacher's tolerance of L1 encourages risk-taking in English.
P15	6	"Using Kurdish in class makes me more relaxed. When I feel comfortable, I try harder to say things in English too."	Comfort with L1 leads to a greater willingness to attempt English.

Table 4: Cultural Identity and Belonging

Participant	Grade	Student Quote	Explanation
P5	4	"My first tongue is Kurdish, which I like. I want to provide instances from Kurdish culture and explain in my own language while we study other nations in English."	L1 affirms cultural identity while learning about others.
P6	4	"The English language is foreign to me, yet the Kurdish language comes naturally to me. It is a reminder of who I am that I can speak Kurdish in the classroom. It is not something I want to give up."	Kurdish functions as a marker of personal identity.

P12	7	"In English class, we discuss various cultures, but I find it interesting to compare them to the customs of the Kurdish people. A sense of pride in my identity is evoked when I use Kurdish."	Kurdish allows expression of cultural pride and belonging.
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Table 5: Teacher Influence and Expectations

Participant	Grade	Student Quote	Explanation
P10	6	"There are occasions when the instructor will explain very challenging material in Kurdish. Even though this is helpful, she will always ask us to repeat in English."	The teacher uses L1 strategically for clarification but maintains L2 focus.
P3	5	"According to our instructor, it is OK to ask questions in Kurdish; however, the responses should be given in English. This prompts me to give additional consideration to my response."	The teacher encourages L1 for inquiry but enforces L2 for output.

Summary of Student Voices by Theme

Mother Tongue as Support (P1, P4, P9, P14): Students see Kurdish as a bridge to understanding new vocabulary, grammar, and concepts. Overreliance as a Barrier (P2, P8, P13, P16): Students acknowledge that using Kurdish too much reduces their English practice. Confidence and Comfort (P3, P7, P11, P15): Kurdish reduces anxiety and creates a safe environment for risk-taking in English.

Cultural Identity (P5, P6, P12): Students value Kurdish as a marker of identity and cultural pride. Teacher Role (P10, P3 follow-up): Teachers shape when and how Kurdish is used, balancing support with English practice.

Teachers' Interviews Narratives with Themes. The following table summarizes three teacher perspectives, aligned with the student themes. Each teacher quote is linked to the relevant theme, with an explanation of how it supports or contrasts with the student narratives.

Table 6: Teacher Perspectives on L1 Use in English Classrooms

Theme	Teacher Quote	Explanation
Mother Tongue as a Learning Aid	"I sometimes allow students to discuss in Kurdish for a minute when the concept is very difficult. It helps them grasp the meaning faster before we return to English." (T1, Grades 4-6)	The teacher acknowledges that L1 can be strategically used to scaffold comprehension of complex material. This mirrors student experiences of using Kurdish for peer and self-support.
Overreliance on L1 as a Barrier	"The problem is that once students realize they can use Kurdish, they rely on it too much. Then English practice decreases, and their fluency develops more slowly." (T2, Grades 5-7)	The teacher highlights the same risk that students noted: that the overuse of Kurdish reduces practice in English. It emphasizes the need for balance between support and immersion.
Confidence, Identity, and Teacher Expectations	"Using Kurdish occasionally makes students feel safe and proud of their identity. But I always encourage them to give their final answers in English to balance comfort with progress." (T3, Grades 4-7)	The teacher connects L1 use to emotional comfort and cultural identity, but stresses expectations for English output. This reflects the dual role of L1 in reducing anxiety and reinforcing learning.

Teachers, much like their students, recognize that Kurdish plays both a facilitative and limiting role in the English classroom. As a learning aid, teachers permit Kurdish in moments of difficulty, confirming that the L1 can provide immediate scaffolding. This parallels student narratives about using Kurdish to clarify vocabulary or compare grammar.



As a barrier, teachers warn of overreliance, stressing that once students become comfortable in Kurdish, they lose valuable practice opportunities in English. This is consistent with student self-reflections on feeling “lazy” or “less motivated” when they switch too often.

For confidence and identity, teachers acknowledge the importance of Kurdish for reducing anxiety and maintaining cultural pride, but they also underline their responsibility to ensure that final outputs are in English. This nuanced approach shows teachers view Kurdish not as a replacement for English, but as a strategic support that must be carefully managed.

3.2 Discussion

The investigation of the dynamics of mother tongue use in education indicates a complicated connection that has a substantial influence on the learning and engagement of students. At the same time, teachers’ perspectives reveal how instructional choices shape these dynamics. By bringing together both student and teacher voices, it becomes clear that the mother tongue in education is not simply a tool or an obstacle, but a multifaceted resource that influences comprehension, confidence, and cultural identity. Educators can fine-tune their practices to create inclusive environments that respect linguistic diversity while still promoting English development. The results of this research can be broken down into five primary categories: the use of the mother tongue as a learning aid, overreliance on the L1 as a barrier, confidence and classroom comfort, cultural identity and belonging, and teacher influence and expectations.

Students consistently claimed that using Kurdish in the classroom helped them understand new vocabulary and grammar. For younger students in grades 4–6 especially, the mother tongue offered cognitive scaffolding that kept them from disengaging when topics felt too advanced. This echoes Cook’s (2001) and Macaro’s (2009) claims that the L1 serves as a scaffold for comprehension, and García and Kleyn’s (2016) argument that translanguaging strengthens access to content and language development.

Teachers echoed this function. One teacher (T1) explained, “*I sometimes allow students to discuss in Kurdish for a minute when the concept is very difficult. It helps them grasp the meaning faster before we return to English.*” This reinforces the idea that strategic L1 use can bridge knowledge gaps before learners re-engage with English.

While students valued Kurdish for comprehension, many admitted that excessive use restricted their practice in English. Some confessed to “feeling lazy” or replying too quickly in Kurdish instead of challenging themselves. This finding is consistent with Levine’s (2011) caution that too much reliance on L1 impedes communicative competence, and with Littlewood and Yu’s (2011) warning that overuse undermines immersion.

Teachers observed the same risk. As T2 noted, “*The problem is that once students realize they can use Kurdish, they rely on it too much. Then English practice decreases, and their fluency develops more slowly.*” Both groups, therefore, highlight the importance of balance: Kurdish helps – but only when used strategically and not as the default.

Students described Kurdish as a psychological safety net that reduced their anxiety about making mistakes in English. This resonates with Krashen’s (1982) affective filter hypothesis and Dörnyei’s (2001) argument that lowering anxiety promotes greater willingness to communicate. By allowing limited Kurdish use, students felt safe to attempt English later, demonstrating how the L1 can nurture risk-taking.

Teachers shared this perspective. As T3 explained, “*Using Kurdish occasionally makes students feel safe and proud of their identity. But I always encourage them to give their final answers in English to balance comfort with progress.*” This shows that teachers recognize the affective benefits of L1 but intentionally channel them toward English output.

Another strong theme was the cultural value of Kurdish. Students expressed pride in using their language while learning about other nations, drawing parallels between Kurdish customs and international cultures. This aligns with Cummins’ (2000) and Hornberger and Link’s (2012) assertion that maintaining L1 supports identity construction and resists linguistic marginalization.

Teachers also acknowledged this, framing Kurdish as more than just a learning tool – it is tied to students’ sense of self. As T3 noted, Kurdish use affirms identity while not replacing the

necessity of English production. This dual perspective shows how classrooms can become spaces where cultural belonging and global language learning coexist.

The final theme emphasizes the crucial role of teachers in shaping how Kurdish is used. Students noted that when teachers allowed L1 for clarification but required English for responses, they felt both supported and challenged. This reflects Macaro's (2014) "optimal L1 use" approach and Turnbull and Dailey-O' Cain's (2009) recommendation for flexible, context-sensitive rules. Teachers confirmed this balancing act. T1 and T3 stressed that Kurdish is permitted at moments of need, but that final answers and practice must occur in English. This validates students' experiences of feeling simultaneously reassured and pushed toward growth, showing that teacher expectations strongly determine the success of bilingual strategies.

4. Conclusion

This research examined both student and teacher perspectives on the use of Kurdish in English classes. Students valued Kurdish for understanding difficult material, reducing anxiety, and affirming identity, but also admitted that it could limit English practice. Teachers confirmed these dynamics, highlighting the importance of strategic use and high expectations for English output. Together, these voices reveal that the mother tongue plays a dual role – supportive yet potentially restrictive – and that effective teaching requires a careful balance. Viewing language repertoires as assets rather than obstacles allows educators to strengthen both linguistic competence and cultural belonging. Future studies should continue exploring teacher practices and classroom dynamics in larger educational contexts to deepen this understanding.

4.1 Implications

When taken together, the student and teacher perspectives reveal the dual function of the mother tongue: it scaffolds understanding and provides emotional and cultural anchoring, yet it can hinder English acquisition if overused. The findings underline the importance of balance and intentionality – teachers must value Kurdish while progressively encouraging English practice. This supports Cook (2001) and Cummins (2000), who argue that multilingualism should be seen as an advantage, not a problem.

For pedagogy, this means fostering classrooms where Kurdish is not banned but carefully managed: it is allowed for comprehension, identity, and confidence, but English is prioritized for practice and production. Such approaches not only improve learning outcomes but also create more inclusive and motivating environments.

4.2 Suggestions for Further Studies

Examine the Advantages and Disadvantages of Bilingual Education in Private Schools
Future research could explore the benefits and challenges of implementing bilingual education programs for Kurdish-speaking students in private schools. This includes examining how integrating both English and Kurdish affects comprehension, engagement, and overall language development. Comparing different models of bilingual education may also shed light on best practices for maximizing learning outcomes.

Investigate Teachers' Perceptions of Long-Term Student Benefits
Further studies could investigate teachers' perspectives on the long-term advantages students gain from attending private schools that offer English-language instruction. This could include academic achievement, professional opportunities, intercultural competence, and cognitive development. Understanding these perceptions can inform both policy and instructional practices in bilingual settings.

Explore the Role of Bilingual Education in Developing Dual Language Competencies
Research could focus on how bilingual programs contribute to students' proficiency and communicative competence in both English and Kurdish. Such studies might examine the cognitive, linguistic, and social benefits of dual-language development, including students' ability to switch between languages effectively and use them in authentic contexts.

Examine Implications for Teacher Training and Curriculum Design
Future studies could investigate how shifts in bilingual education practices influence teacher preparation and curriculum development in private schools. This may include exploring how



teacher training programs can better equip educators to manage the use of both languages in the classroom, design effective lesson plans, and implement translanguaging strategies that support learning.

Analyze the Influence of Cultural Context on Language Learning
It would be valuable to study how the broader cultural environment affects the effectiveness of bilingual education in private schools. This could include examining cultural attitudes toward English and Kurdish, students' cultural identities, and how cultural norms shape classroom interactions and language acquisition. Understanding these factors can help tailor instructional approaches to the specific needs of multilingual learners.

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