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First Language Use in Kazakhstani EFL Classrooms: Navigating Pedagogical Benefits and Policy Tensions

Askat Tleuov

Department of Education, College of Human Sciences and Education, KIMEP University, Almaty, Kazakhstan

Email: a.tleuov@kimep.kz

Abstract

Debate persists over the place of students' first language (L1) in English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) classrooms, especially where English-only policies dominate multilingual contexts. While research increasingly documents the benefits of judicious L1 use, much evidence is self-reported and overlooks real-time classroom practice and policy constraints. This qualitative multiple-case study addresses that gap by analyzing how four experienced teachers in Kazakhstani secondary schools integrate L1 and what shapes their decisions. Forty lesson observations, complemented by pre-observation and stimulated-recall interviews, show that teachers employ Kazakh or Russian strategically to scaffold complex grammar and lexis, manage behavior, and forge affective rapport. Brief switches often calm learners and untangle difficult points, yet participants worry that excessive L1 erodes vital English exposure. Code-switching frequency reflects a network of influences: teachers' beliefs and language-learning histories, class size, proficiency distribution, and institutional rules. Top-down English-only mandates rarely mesh with daily instructional realities, forcing educators to negotiate tensions in the moment. Findings support a nuanced, context-responsive stance: flexible policy guidelines and professional development that legitimize selective L1 use and equip teachers with decision-making heuristics can better balance pedagogical benefits with immersion goals, strengthening bilingual education quality in Kazakhstan and comparable multilingual regions. Data were coded inductively and then synthesized across cases to reveal both convergent and divergent patterns of L1 deployment. The study contributes classroom-grounded evidence from an under-researched Central Asian context and invites policymakers to co-construct guidelines with practitioners. It also offers teacher educators concrete scenarios for training modules that rehearse the moment-by-moment language-choice decisions facing multilingual instructors.

Keywords: L1 use, EFL classrooms, teacher cognition, language policy, multilingual education

Introduction

During the last few decades, scholars have repeatedly revisited the question of how—and how much—the first language (L1) should feature in English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) classes. Their findings and disagreements have shaped policy and nudged teachers to rethink everyday practice. Yet, a clear consensus seems to remain out of reach. Because any switch to the L1 impacts

teaching efficiency, learner engagement, and eventual language mastery, the stakes are high. In particular, this dilemma appears to be most stark in multilingual classrooms, where teachers must reconcile diverse linguistic repertoires, demanding curricula, and English-only mandates. These unresolved tensions signal a need for context-bound investigations that spell out the concrete gains, drawbacks, and trade-offs of integrating the L1 in EFL classrooms.

In Kazakhstan, official language policy and classroom reality intersect in ways that cast the L1 issue into sharp relief. The State Programme for Implementing Language Policy (2020–2025) promotes full trilingual competence in Kazakh, Russian, and English: English is framed as a vehicle for education and international exchange, while Kazakh remains the cornerstone of public discourse and interethnic communication (Government of Kazakhstan, 2019). To meet those aims, curricula now introduce English earlier and for more hours. Nonetheless, teachers still stand before classes in which Kazakh, Russian, or both of those languages dominate informal interaction amongst students. Teachers are also expected to balance learners' linguistic repertoires with top-down expectations (often expressed as aforementioned English-only mandates) while keeping lessons effective. In their everyday practice, they confront the same question: when, for what reasons, and how much should the L1 appear in the EFL classroom?

Attitudes toward using the first language in language teaching have not stood still: what was once forbidden is now, in many quarters, accepted—albeit cautiously—and each swing of the pendulum has left its mark on day-to-day practice. In the 1940s and 1950s, theorists such as Fries (1945) and Brooks (1960) treated target-language immersion as the most effective route to fluency and therefore ruled the mother tongue out of bounds. Later, sociocultural theory began to move away from that stance. Vygotsky (1978), for example, recast any language a learner knows as a cognitive tool for constructing new understandings and concepts. Recent cross-linguistic research pushes the argument further. For instance, Sarkhosh and Samoudi (2023), working with Turkmen-speaking children, suggest that the shape of relative-clause acquisition mirrors structures already present in the L1—a reminder that so-called universals are filtered through local grammars. Such insights lend weight to investigating how teachers in multilingual settings like Kazakhstan decide when to draw on students' first languages and when to hold the line on English-only interaction.

Drawing on these theoretical insights, Atkinson (1987) extended the conversation into a new lane. He suggested that careful and deliberate use of students' first language could indeed enhance students' L2 learning experiences and outcomes. This could be achieved if L1 is strategically used, for example, for improving clarity of instructions, providing emotional reassurance, and increasing learner participation. His perspective was soon supported by empirical evidence. Duff and Polio (1990), for example, concluded that even teachers who explicitly aimed for English-only instruction often resorted to L1 when explaining grammar concepts, clarifying vocabulary, or managing classroom behavior. This shift was further reinforced by Auerbach

(1993), who argued emphatically for the structured, purposeful inclusion of the first language in language teaching practices, thereby consolidating this new paradigm.

Extending those ideas, Atkinson (1987) introduced a marked change in thinking by suggesting that well-timed, strategic, limited recourse to EFL students' first language can improve instructional explanations, reduce foreign language anxiety, and draw students into learning. Classroom studies by Duff and Polio (1990) appear to support those conclusions: even teachers who espoused English-only ideals utilized L1 for grammar, vocabulary, or discipline. Later, Auerbach (1993) moved the field further. He argued for an overt, systematic, and principled framework that introduces and normalizes such purposeful code-switching in language lessons and guides teachers through the process of integrating L1 in foreign language classes.

Even with this gradual softening of the English-only stance, recent studies still paint an uneven picture. EFL teachers' code-switching habits appear to differ sharply, shaped by class make-up, proficiency levels, and the pressure of institutional rules. Some investigations link selective and strategic L1 integration to clearer understanding, lower foreign language anxiety, and smoother lesson flow (Sampson, 2012; Carson & Kashihara, 2012). Others warn that frequent switching can curtail the very English exposure learners need and demand for fluent communication skills development (Turnbull & Dailey-O'Cain, 2009). Global surveys indicate that most EFL teachers make use of L1, yet also reveal a striking lack of common systematic principles to guide that practice (Hall & Cook, 2013). The evidence base is further weakened by heavy reliance on questionnaires and self-reports rather than live classroom observation. Particularly, we still know little about how teachers in multilingual, heavily policy-regulated contexts such as Kazakhstan weigh conflicting demands when they decide whether to allow L1 use in foreign language classrooms.

These gaps call for close-up, context-sensitive research that watches lessons unfold and then probes teachers' reflections—methods such as prolonged observation combined with stimulated-recall interviews. Furthermore, existing literature seemingly neglects how institutional language policies influence teachers' on-the-ground pedagogical decisions. Thus, leaving a theoretical and practical void. As EFL instruction in Kazakhstan and similar multilingual environments increasingly confronts tensions between policy expectations and classroom realities, there is a pressing need to better understand how teachers navigate these conflicting demands, and how these decisions impact teaching effectiveness and learner outcomes.

To address these gaps, the present study investigates how Kazakhstani secondary school EFL teachers strategically use students' first language in their classrooms, the rationale behind their pedagogical decisions, and the benefits and tensions experienced. Specifically, this study poses the following research questions:

1. How do secondary school EFL teachers in Kazakhstan use L1 as a pedagogical scaffold in their classrooms?

2. What factors influence teachers' decisions to integrate L1 in EFL instruction, and how do these factors vary across different classroom contexts?
3. What are the perceived benefits and challenges of L1 use in EFL classrooms?

This study aims to connect theoretical insights and practical pedagogical applications, providing knowledge that can impact teacher education, language policy, and classroom practice. It offers empirical data on how L1 is used by teachers in Kazakhstan's multilingual and policy-driven educational context, contributing original perspectives to international discussions about effective language teaching practices.

Method

Research Design

The study adopts an in-depth qualitative multiple-case study design which is guided by an interpretivist stance that prioritizes thick description and the participants' own perspectives. The "case" in this study was defined as the day-to-day instructional routine of an individual secondary-school EFL teacher in Kazakhstan. Four such cases were identified to provide variation in school setting, class size, and teacher experience. A multiple-case strategy was chosen because it affords two analytic advantages (Yin, 2014; Stake, 2006). Firstly, it lets the researcher document each teacher's language choices in situ, retaining the complexity of local conditions—such as curriculum demands, pupil proficiency, administrative oversight—that a single-site inquiry might miss. Secondly, by juxtaposing cases side by side, the design allows cross-case thematic comparison. This enables identification of patterns that cut across classrooms as well as divergences that stem from context-specific constraints or teacher beliefs. In this way, the approach moves beyond anecdotal reports of L1 use and toward a more systematic account of the factors that shape, limit, or encourage code-switching in Kazakhstani EFL instruction.

Participants and Selection Criteria

The participants comprised four EFL teachers (Peter, Adam, Mary, and David) working in state secondary schools in Kazakhstan. These teachers were selected according to specific criteria relevant to the study's aims. The selection criteria required teachers to have at least five years of teaching experience, be employed at secondary schools, and incorporate varying amounts of L1 in their EFL instruction. The selection aimed to represent a range of pedagogical beliefs, training backgrounds, and teaching practices concerning the use of L1.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected using two primary qualitative research methods: classroom observations and teacher interviews.

Classroom Observations

Each teacher was observed for 10 full-length classroom lessons, resulting in a total of 40 classroom observations. Observations were conducted in a non-participant manner to minimize researcher influence on classroom dynamics. Detailed field notes documented the frequency, nature, and context of teachers' L1 use. Particular attention was paid to how L1 was integrated pedagogically (e.g., grammar explanations, vocabulary clarifications), emotionally (e.g., rapport-building), and practically (e.g., classroom management).

Interviews

Two types of interviews supplemented classroom observations: one pre-observation interview (POI) and five stimulated-recall interviews (SRI) per teacher.

- Pre-Observation Interviews (POI): Conducted before the classroom observations, these interviews explored teachers' stated beliefs, previous experiences, and intended practices regarding the use of L1 in their teaching.
- Stimulated-Recall Interviews (SRI): Following every two classroom observations, teachers participated in SRIs to reflect on their observed classroom behaviors. Selected audio segments from lessons were used as prompts to elicit detailed explanations of their in-the-moment decisions related to L1 use (Gass & Mackey, 2000; Lyle, 2003). Interviews were conducted in mixed languages (English, Russian, and Kazakh) according to teachers' preferences and comfort levels. All quotes presented in the findings were translated by the researcher.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis procedures as described by Braun and Clarke (2006) were used to analyze the data in this study. During the first phase of data analysis, I conducted within-case coding and theme building. The classroom observation notes and interview transcripts were read multiple times for thorough familiarity. Codes were generated inductively to capture distinct instances and rationales behind teachers' L1 use. These codes were then reviewed and refined in several cycles constantly referring back to the raw extracts to make sure that they accurately represented the original data.

In the second phase I aimed for cross-case thematic synthesis After the within-case themes were stable, I applied Thomas and Harden's (2008) thematic-synthesis procedure to the full set of four cases. Using an inter-case matrix, I compared where themes overlapped (e.g., L1 for affective support) and where they diverged (e.g., policy-driven restrictions). This step aligned with the study's overall multiple-case rationale: it moved the analysis beyond individual portraits to an integrated account that highlights both shared patterns and context-specific variations in teachers' L1 use, the thinking behind it, and the external forces that shape those choices.

Trustworthiness

In order to ensure the study's credibility, I drew on several mutually reinforcing strategies. For instance, data triangulation combined ten lesson observations with one pre-observation and five stimulated-recall interviews for each teacher. This approach provided multiple vantage points on every classroom event. Likewise, a prolonged presence—roughly twelve weeks in total—let me observe routine, not exceptional, practice and deepened my grasp of school's culture. The study aimed to produce thick, contextual descriptions of the physical setting, policy constraints, and participant backgrounds so that readers can judge the study's transferability. During each stimulated-recall session I tried to engage in member checking, inviting teachers to confirm, nuance, or contest the emerging interpretations and understandings. Finally, an audit trail of field notes, coding memos, and decision logs supports the trustworthiness of the analysis (Alder, 2022; Merriam, 2009).

Ethical Considerations

Each participating teacher received an information sheet in both Kazakh and Russian outlining the study's aims, the voluntary nature of participation, and the specific use of classroom audio for stimulated-recall interviews. Consent was obtained from the school administration and all participating teachers before any data collection began. To protect privacy, all recordings, transcripts, and field notes were stored on a password-protected, university-encrypted drive accessible only to me. Teachers chose their own pseudonyms, and those aliases replace any identifying detail in the manuscript. Participants were informed that they could pause a recording, skip a question, or withdraw entirely at any point during the study without providing explanations.

No artificial-intelligence tools were used to collect, transcribe, code, or interpret the data, nor to draft the text of this paper. The sole AI-powered application used was Grammarly. It served as a proofreading tool to flag mechanical errors in grammar, spelling, and word choice after the manuscript was fully written. All suggested corrections were reviewed by the author and accepted only when they did not change meaning or academic tone. Thus, while an automated tool contributed to surface-level language polishing, every analytical claim—and the wording of each sentence—remains the product of human judgement.

Findings

The findings are arranged around the main patterns that emerged when teachers drew on learners' first language (L1) during English lessons. Evidence comes from three qualitative sources — classroom observations, one pre-observation interview per teacher, and a set of stimulated-recall interviews conducted after every second lesson with each teacher. For ease of reading, these sources are abbreviated throughout: an entry such as PCO3, for instance, refers to Peter's third classroom observation, APOI1 to Adam's pre-observation interview, and MSRI2 to Mary's second stimulated-recall session. All interviews were conducted in a mix of English,

Kazakh, and Russian; therefore, all quotations that appear in the text in this section were translated into English by the author and checked with the research participants for accuracy.

The study followed four state-school instructors — Peter, Adam, Mary, and David — each treated as a separate case. Taken together, their data tell a connected story that unfolds along five themes:

1. L1 as a scaffold for grammar and lexis;
2. L1 for classroom management and rapport-building;
3. teachers' worries about overuse;
4. students' mixed views on L1 support; and
5. how individual beliefs and institutional rules shape day-to-day language choices.

These themes make up the framework for the sections that follow and make it possible to trace the complex balance teachers attempted to strike when deciding whether, when, and how much to switch out of English during the EFL classes.

L1 as a Pedagogical Scaffold

This section provides account of how the participants strategically and selectively integrated L1 to scaffold complex linguistic and cognitive processes in the EFL classroom.

Facilitating Grammar and Vocabulary Learning

The data indicate that well-timed switches into the first language can untangle complex points far more quickly than extended explanations in English alone. In one lesson, for example, Adam sensed growing uncertainty around a tricky grammar form; he paused, gave a concise clarification in Kazakh, and then shifted straight back to English, later remarking that "the brief Kazakh detour settles confusion instantly" (ACO4). Likewise, Mary employs a similar tactic with high-level vocabulary in environmental science, slipping in a one-sentence gloss in Russian so that "students latch on to the meaning and retain it better" (MSRI3). Peter echoed this sentiment in his pre-observation interview, emphasizing, "Some grammar concepts are too abstract in English alone, so a short Kazakh explanation helps students grasp it faster" (PPOI1). Thus, targeted use of students' L1 was consistently employed by the teachers as a supportive pedagogical tool, quickly clarifying potentially problematic linguistic points.

Reducing Learner Anxiety Through Clarifications

Teachers' occasional use of L1 for clarifications fosters a lower-anxiety classroom atmosphere, enabling students to engage more confidently in L2 tasks. David noted during his stimulated-recall interview that his deliberate choice to clarify instructions in Russian visibly reduced students' tension: "You can immediately see their relief; they relax because they fully understand the instructions" (DSRI5). Peter similarly observed improved participation after

switching briefly to Kazakh for clarification purposes, recalling, "Students appeared visibly less anxious and were quicker to participate in the subsequent English-language activities" (PCO6). This supportive strategy was further reflected in Mary's classroom practice, as she embedded reassuring phrases in Russian when introducing particularly challenging activities, explaining, "It's important for them to know exactly what to do; otherwise, anxiety can take over and block learning" (MSRI1). Thus, intentional clarifications in L1 served to alleviate stress and enhance active learner engagement.

Providing Academic and Emotional Support

Teachers also opt for L1 when the obstacle before them is emotional rather than linguistic; a few words in Kazakh or Russian can steady a class as effectively as a grammar gloss. An example for this comes from Adam's class when he turned to Kazakh when he saw a student's confidence dip, noting that "encouragement in their own language feels more authentic; they seem to relax and ready to keep going" (ASRI2). The same instinct is evident in Mary's case: during one observation she appeared to sooth an upset student with a quick phrase in Russian before resuming the lesson (MCO7). Similarly, David, interviewed before his observations, reinforced this view, arguing that a brief, sincere word in Russian "can lift motivation and self-belief when frustration sets in" (DPOI1). Across the four cases, then, L1 proved valuable not just for cognitive scaffolding but for emotional reassurance, helping to maintain a classroom climate that balances challenge with support.

L1 for Classroom Management and Rapport-Building

The evidence presented in this section suggests that, when behavioral or routine matters arise, teachers often resort to learners' L1—both to restore order quickly and to reinforce rapport with the class.

Addressing Discipline and On-Task Behavior

It appears that through L1 instructions, EFL teachers establish order and deal with misconduct efficiently, especially among lower-proficiency or younger learners. Data from classroom observations illustrates how Adam, for instance, provided classroom management instructions in Kazakh to quickly redirect off-task behaviors and regain students' attention (ACO3). Similarly, Peter, during one observation, promptly used Kazakh to address disruptive behavior. During the post-observation interview he explained that "students respond faster to discipline in their native language as it seems to carry more immediate weight and clarity" (PSRI4). In a similar vein, according to Mary, issuing concise instructions in Russian serves to "minimize confusion and quickly restore classroom order," a practice notably beneficial with younger students who can become easily distracted (MSRI5). Consequently, these cases seem to suggest that teachers purposefully use L1 as a strategic tool to maintain classroom discipline and promote task engagement.

Creating a Sense of Safety and Community

Purposeful switch to L1 also works on a social plane: a brief step into the learners' own language can reduce the distance between teacher and class and help a mixed group feel like a single community. David remarked that a sentence in Russian "puts students at ease and signals the room is a safe, open space" (DSRI1). Mary voiced a similar view, adding that the occasional Russian aside "reinforces mutual respect and gives everyone breathing room" (MPOI1). In Adam's lessons the effect was visible; short Kazakh words of praise softened the atmosphere and coaxed quieter pupils into the discussion (ACO8). In each instance, then, the first language functioned less as linguistic scaffolding and more as a relational tool for building trust and belonging.

Concerns About Overreliance on L1

Despite acknowledging its advantages, the data also reveal teachers' concerns about the potential overuse of L1 in L2 classrooms. These concerns come from both the teachers and students who voiced apprehensions that excessive recourse to first language could limit target-language immersion and fluency development.

Teacher Reservations and Dilemmas

Majority of the participants reported uncertainty about balancing the practical advantages of L1 use against the goal of maximizing exposure to the target language. For example, Peter expressed hesitation during his interview when noting that although clarifications in Kazakh language did help resolve confusion amongst students, frequent L1 usage might inadvertently reduce necessary English practice (PSRI2). Adam, similarly, conveyed internal conflict, commenting, "Each time I switch to Kazakh, yes, there's worry I might be limiting opportunities to use English" (APOI1). During classroom observations, David paused before employing Russian to clarify instructions. He later explained that students might "become overly dependent on Russian and Kazakh rather than striving to negotiate meaning in English" (DCO5). These reflections appear to shed light on teachers' dilemmas about calibrating L1 and L2 use to optimize classroom learning outcomes.

Student Ambivalence Toward L1

Many students appreciated L1 clarifications for ideas; however, a notable minority expressed concerns that frequent L1 use might hinder practice opportunities in L2. For instance, Mary stated during her interview that some students requested more English-only interactions. Perhaps, according to Mary, those students believed that such English-only exposure would enhance their fluency (MSRI4). Similarly, classroom observations indicated students occasionally becoming passive when teachers switched languages frequently, with one student privately commenting afterward, "When the teacher uses Russian a lot, it feels like we miss chances to improve our English comprehension" (PCO9). Conversely, other students emphasized that brief L1 explanations facilitated their understanding of challenging materials. These mixed responses

indicate a nuanced student perspective. While they seemed to appreciate L1 use for improving the clarity of instructions, they also recognized the importance of sustained English exposure.

Institutional Policies and Pressures

Curriculum demands and school-level guidelines were often at odds with the practical realities teachers encountered daily. This contributed additional tensions around when and how L1 should be employed. Adam mentioned during a pre-observation interview that institutional directives strongly advocated maximum English usage which made him stressful whenever he decided to use Kazakh for clarifications in the classroom (APOI3). David had a similar perspective on this issue. His sentiment was that despite institutional expectations for English-dominant lessons, the students' proficiency levels compelled him to use L1 for explanations (DSRI2). Observations confirmed these tensions. Teachers appeared cautious when choosing to integrate L1 for instructional clarity or emotional support (MCO6). Thus, the teachers' attempts to adhere to institutional guidelines while addressing students' immediate needs in the classrooms reveal the complex dynamics underlying their strategic choices regarding L1 use.

Student Perceptions of L1 Use

This section examines students' attitudes toward using L1 in English class, noting differences based on proficiency and learning preferences, as observed in class and through teachers' reflections.

Learners' Preference for Quick Comprehension

Observations and teachers' reflections indicated that students often welcomed brief L1 explanations, which appeared to provide rapid conceptual clarity and reduce confusion. In Mary's classroom, students consistently appeared more comfortable and engaged immediately after she provided short Russian clarifications, an observation Mary confirmed by noting, "They grasp the meaning faster, and it noticeably saves instructional time" (MSRI2). Similarly, Adam reflected that when he briefly clarified challenging points in Kazakh, students seemed more readily able to follow subsequent English instructions and demonstrated increased participation (ACO7). These instances indicate students' apparent preference for timely and concise L1 support to facilitate immediate understanding.

Desire for English Immersion Among Higher-Levels

Classroom observations revealed that more advanced or highly motivated students sometimes displayed behaviors indicating a preference for minimized L1 use, seeking sustained English-only interaction. David recounted instances when higher-level students deliberately persisted in English during activities, leading him to interpret their behavior as a desire for continuous English practice (DSRI3). Observations of Peter's lessons further uncovered similar tendencies, with certain students actively maintaining English dialogue despite occasional Kazakh interruptions by the teacher; Peter himself recognized this as evidence that some students valued

extensive practice opportunities in English (PCO8). Such behaviors suggest that a subset of students actively seeks greater immersion to facilitate language development and proficiency.

Impact on Self-Confidence and Motivation

Teachers observed and later confirmed during interviews that students appeared more confident and motivated when they knew strategic L1 support was available without hindering their overall English progression. Adam observed students' increased willingness to engage in challenging language tasks when they anticipated targeted Kazakh explanations, noting during a stimulated recall, "They attempt difficult activities more readily, knowing they have support if needed" (ASRI5). Likewise, Mary's reflections on classroom events indicated that students regularly showed heightened participation and self-assurance following brief Russian clarifications of task instructions or vocabulary, suggesting they felt encouraged by accessible support at key points (MCO4). These observations underline the role of balanced L1 use in maintaining both student confidence and active involvement in language learning activities.

Variations in L1 Use Across Teachers and Classes

The data indicate that individual teacher beliefs, class composition, and contextual factors result in varied approaches to the use of students' first language (L1) in the EFL classroom.

Differences by Teacher Beliefs and Training

Teachers' backgrounds, pedagogical philosophies, and prior language learning experiences contribute to variations in their frequency and manner of employing L1. Adam frequently included Kazakh explanations, which he attributed during an interview to his personal experiences as a learner, suggesting he "empathized deeply with students who struggle without clear instructions in their native language" (ASRI4). Conversely, Peter's lessons exhibited comparatively restrained L1 usage, and he explained this practice as being shaped by his professional training emphasizing maximal English exposure (PPOI2). Mary's reflective commentary revealed a moderate stance; she advocated using Russian primarily for facilitating challenging vocabulary comprehension or supporting emotional well-being, influenced by her own bilingual upbringing (MSRI5). These teacher-specific factors demonstrate clearly discernible differences in L1 utilization patterns across classrooms.

Influences of Student Demographics and Class Size

The data also reveal how student proficiency levels and class sizes appear to shape the frequency and pattern of L1 use, with larger groups or classes of lower proficiency demonstrating greater reliance on L1. Classroom observations of David teaching larger classes revealed frequent Russian interventions, often associated with maintaining order and clarifying task procedures, a practice he acknowledged as necessary given the challenges presented by larger, mixed-ability groups (DCO6). In contrast, Peter's smaller and more advanced class engaged in predominantly English-based interactions, with minimal L1 interventions; Peter noted these students

demonstrated greater autonomy and required less direct support in Kazakh (PSRI3). Thus, differences in proficiency levels and group sizes evidently contribute to distinct approaches regarding L1 application in instructional practice.

Institutional and Sociocultural Factors

School policies, broader social attitudes toward bilingual education, and availability of educational resources further influence teachers' choices to use L1 or adhere predominantly to English. Adam reflected during a stimulated-recall interview that institutional expectations emphasizing English-only environments created tension, particularly when immediate Kazakh clarifications appeared necessary to maintain effective instruction (ASRI1). Mary similarly identified societal pressures advocating monolingual English approaches as critical, yet recognized the practical necessity for occasional Russian support due to limited instructional materials available solely in English (MPOI2). Observations and teacher commentary consistently suggested that institutional guidelines and sociocultural norms regarding bilingualism actively shaped their instructional decision-making about language use in the classroom.

Summary of Key Findings

The data from the findings section offers insights into how EFL teachers in state secondary schools in Kazakhstan incorporate L1 into instruction. Data reveal a complex pattern of L1 use. Teachers reverted to L1 at pivotal moments, frequently to clarify a difficult tense or to link a new lexical item to the students' existing knowledge base. A concise translation or analogy in the first language saved time, dispelled confusion, and lowered visible anxiety when a lesson ventured into unfamiliar (to students) or challenging terrains.

Teachers' perceptions of students' emotional and relational needs mattered as well. Several teachers described the brief use of L1 as a means of pulling hesitant students back into the lessons flow. Students responded quickly: eye contact improved, hands went up, and side-talk subsided once perplexing instructions have been clarified in words familiar to students. Those same teachers, nonetheless, that frequent code-switching might erode exposure to target language. At times, they were observed to pause mid-sentence, to judge whether a switch to L1 would be useful in that scenario.

Patterns varied widely. Personal biography, professional training, class size, and learner proficiency all influenced choices. Teachers with less experience who had completed English-only teacher education programs resisted L1 except in moments of genuine breakdown, whereas their more experienced colleagues (especially those who had studied through a bilingual mode) introduced it ore freely. Larger mixed-ability classes head L1 more often; advanced groups in elective streams rarely did. Instructional policy added another layer of complexity. The school promoted an English-rich and English-only environment, yet those guidelines met resistance when text schedules intensified or when younger students struggled to stay engaged.

Overall, the evidence indicates that L1 can serve as both a bridge and a potential barrier. Used sparingly and strategically and with a clear pedagogical aim, it may help accelerate comprehension and stabilize classroom climate. Applied without restraint, or without an aim to achieve learning outcomes, it may curtail practice in the target language. Teachers in the study appeared to follow a middle path: they read the room, considered the learning objective, and chose the language most likely to move the lesson forward while striving to preserve space for immersion in English.

Discussion

This section discusses and contextualizes the current findings in relation to existing research by noting similarities and differences with previous literature and examining the theoretical and educational implications of L1 use in EFL classrooms. This discussion situates empirical findings within the broader discourse on bilingual instructional strategies, clarifying the relevance of the research, highlighting its contributions, and challenging assumptions about L1 use.

L1 as a Pedagogical Scaffold: Efficiency vs. Immersion

Drawing on a translanguaging lens (Garcia & Wei, 2014), the present study positions first-language moves as part of a single, flexible linguistic repertoire rather than as intrusions into an English-only space. The EFL teachers used Kazakh or Russian to decode complex grammar and unlock low-frequency lexis, then shifted back to English once meaning was secure. Lesson transcripts show that these switches seldom exceeded a few seconds, yet they produced immediate comprehension gains that align with Hall and Cook's (2013) and Nation's (2003) findings on reduced cognitive load.

The Kazakhstani context adds an important nuance to global debates. National policy promotes trilingual competence in Kazakh, Russian, and English, so teachers work under simultaneous pressure to honor local languages and to foster English immersion. This trilingual mandate complicates the strict immersion ideals advanced by Cook (2001) and Turnbull (2001). In several observed lessons, withholding L1 support led to silence and visible anxiety. A concise first-language clarification restored engagement, which suggests that an uncompromising English-only stance may undermine participation when learners confront abstractions that stretch their present proficiency.

Teachers framed these moment-to-moment decisions as a delicate balance. Each participant described scanning class mood, task complexity, and policy expectations before deciding which language would move learning forward. This reflective practice aligns with the translanguaging view that strategic shifts can fortify, rather than dilute, long-term proficiency because they keep learners cognitively and affectively present and engaged in challenging L2 interactions.

Classroom Management and Teacher–Student Rapport: Emotional and Practical Considerations

The emergent insights suggest that firs-language turns serve two intertwined purposes. They curb off-task behavior in large or mixed-ability groups, and they help create a classroom climate in which learners feel seen and supported. This double role is in line with translanguaging research that views language alternation as both a managerial tool and a relationship-building resource.

Teachers described short, unambiguous statements in Kazakh or Russian that settled noise and reclaimed attention within seconds. The research participants' accounts are similar to the findings from the studies by De la Campa and Nassaji (2009) and Copland and Neokleous (2011), and they match the functional category of "management moves" identified in Shin et al.'s (2019) review. In the present sample, such moves proved essential when thirty or more students worked at different proficiency levels. English-only directives often required repetition, yet a single phrase in the shared first language prompted immediate compliance and allowed the lesson to proceed.

Sociocultural theory positions language as a mediating tool for both cognition and emotion (Vygotsky, 1978). Consistent with that view, participants reported that a brief reassurance in the mother tongue lowered tension and drew hesitant students back into group tasks. Similar effects are reported in Garcia and Lin's (2017) work on translanguaging as an "empowering pedagogy". The current findings add detail: when students grappled with role-plays or presentations, a teacher's low-key comment in Kazakh often produced a quick smile and a renewed energy and eye contact. MacIntyre and Gregersen (2012) argue that anxiety suppresses language output; the classroom episodes documented in this study suggest that strategic firs-language use can interrupt that cycle and reopen communicative channels.

Although teachers valued these affective gains, they also expressed concern about long-term dependency on L1 use. There is a possibility that continuous reliance on L1 intervention for emotional support might inadvertently lead to dependency, which might, in its turn, dimmish L2 learners' resilience and reduce their capacity to manage complex emotional scenarios in the target language independently. Subsequently, this raises pedagogical questions about the optimal balance between providing affective support with help of L1 and promoting autonomous emotional regulation in L2 learning.

Student Perceptions: A Complex and Divided Picture

Student views and reactions on L1 use turned out to be neither uniform nor random. They clustered around proficiency level, personal confidence, and perceived task difficulty. This clustering matters because it suggests that a "one-size-fits-all" language policy ignores meaningful variation in cognitive demand and motivational states.

For lower-proficiency students the first language interventions felt like lifeline. The classroom observations revealed a pattern: when the teacher offered a brief L1 comment, shoulders

dropped, eye contact resumed, and comprehension checks passed on the first try. These responses fit Sweller's (2010) cognitive-load framework, which predicts that extraneous processing may diminish when learners receive concise, familiar cues. Teachers also described a surge in participation once they grasped task requirements. Their comments are similar to Sampson's (2012) conclusions that limited L1 use can convert passive listeners into active contributors. From a sociocultural perspective, this momentary reliance on familiar language pushed students into Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, where new forms became approachable rather than forbidding.

By contrast, many upper-intermediate and advanced students appeared to interpret L1 moves as a lost chance to stretch their English competence. They reported a desire for "steady immersion" and a sense of let-down when teacher switched codes during intricate tasks. This reaction aligns with self-determination theory, which posits that autonomy and perceived progress feed intrinsic motivation (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). Sustained English-only interaction gave these students a clear marker of growth. A sudden shift to Kazakh or Russian felt like someone move the target closer, depriving them of a meaningful challenge. Teachers reported that high-proficiency groups often held the floor in English even when L1 help was available.

Variations in L1 Use: The Role of Context and Teacher Beliefs

Teachers appear to decide how and when to employ L1 based on a web of personal pedagogical beliefs, classroom realities, and institutional expectations.

The teachers who participated in the study linked their current code-switching habits to their own experiences as language learners. Those who once depended on an occasional native-language explanation now view such scenarios as legitimate support, whereas teachers who learned successfully through total immersion prefer to stay in English whenever possible. Such impact of prior language learning experiences reinforces Macaro's (2001) claim that teacher cognition powerfully shapes instructional choices.

Field notes revealed a clear pattern: larger, mixed-ability classes prompted more frequent use of Kazakh or Russian for quick explanations or behavior management, while smaller classes of comparatively advanced L2 learners were exposed to far fewer L1 interventions. This evidence aligns with research on differentiated instruction, indicating that practical factors such as equitable access and classroom control often carry as much weight as pedagogical ideology. When a single lesson includes wide proficiency gaps, a brief L1 clarification can keep weaker students from falling behind without significantly reducing English exposure for stronger students.

A notable gap between policy goals and instructional methods was also highlighted in the data. Teachers do value sustained exposure to the target language, yet they also recognize moments when a short L1 phrase restores comprehension, resets behavior, or provides emotional reassurance. Strict monolingual mandates can therefore feel out of step with daily instructional realities, particularly in multilingual classrooms. This mismatch raises an important policy

question: how can administrators craft guidelines that preserve the benefits of immersion while granting teachers the flexibility to deploy the first language when it demonstrably advances learning? The study suggests that collaborative policy design, informed by classroom evidence and teacher input, may be the most realistic path toward aligning institutional expectations with pedagogical practice.

Limitations of the Study

Scope and generalizability

The present investigation focused on four English teachers working in state secondary schools, a sample that is both small and context-specific. As a result, the patterns identified here should not be assumed to describe all Kazakhstani classrooms, let alone EFL settings in other countries or educational levels. Replication with a larger and more varied pool of participants, including teachers from private schools, rural districts, and tertiary programs, would make it possible to test whether the same trends emerge across different institutional landscapes.

Reliance on teacher reports

Students' perspectives entered the data set only indirectly, filtered through teachers' observations and reflections. Although these accounts were detailed and grounded in everyday classroom reality, they cannot substitute for learners' own voices. Future studies could include learner focus groups, individual interviews, or short reflective journals to document how students themselves evaluate first-language scaffolding. Combining teacher and learner viewpoints would offer a more rounded picture of how code-switching affects comprehension, motivation, and confidence.

Observer effect in classroom visits

Because the researcher was physically present during ten lessons for each teacher, it is possible that some behaviors were adjusted, consciously or otherwise. This observer effect may have led teachers to reduce or increase their use of the first language compared with a normal day. To address this concern, subsequent work might employ longer observation periods, unobtrusive video recordings, or teacher-generated lesson logs. These methods could capture practice over time and minimize the likelihood that teachers change their routines simply because someone is watching.

By recognizing these limitations and suggesting concrete methodological refinements, the study lays groundwork for future research that can test the transferability of its findings, integrate learner perspectives, and document classroom practice with greater ecological validity.

Conclusion

Classroom observations and interview data reveal that EFL teachers in Kazakhstani secondary schools choose to use the learners' first language at key moments of instruction. A brief

translation of a difficult grammar rule or a single lexical gloss often clarifies meaning and lowers visible anxiety. Teachers have noted that giving instructions in Kazakh or Russian can settle a restless class more quickly than using English, which assists in maintaining a supportive classroom environment and positive teacher-student interactions.

At the same time, both educators and students voice a recurring worry: too much L1 might curtail valuable exposure to the target language. The benefit is clear, but so is the possible cost. This tension runs through nearly every lesson I examined and highlights the need for careful judgement rather than automatic habits.

Patterns of L1 use are far from uniform. An instructor's own language-learning history, class size, and student proficiency all contribute to the decision. Large mixed-ability groups hear the mother tongue more frequently; small, advanced groups hear it only in passing. Official policy complicates matters further. School and ministry documents often promote an English-only ethos, but the daily realities of EFL classrooms push teachers to compromise.

The evidence, overall, paints a nuanced picture. Selective L1 use supports comprehension, offers emotional reassurance, and makes behavior management more efficient. Blanket prescriptions, whether for or against L1, risk ignoring the complexity of real EFL classrooms. Flexible guidelines that leave room for professional judgement appear more promising than rigid monolingual rules and, seemingly, stand a better chance of improving language-learning outcomes.

The evidence emerging from this study points to a more nuanced stance on first-language use in Kazakhstani secondary EFL classrooms. Instead of treating L1 as either a last-resort crutch or a routine shortcut, teachers benefit from judging each moment on its own merits. The teachers in the study weighed the tasks at hand, the emotional climate, and the cognitive load before choosing whether L1 support can advance or hinder the lesson objective. In-service professional development events should mirror this pragmatic stance. For example, a training could start with case analysis: short video clips from real lessons are played, and the participants identify the instructional problem and the effect of the switch from L2 to L1. In a microteaching segment, participants could be asked to reteach the same excerpt twice-once with L1 support, once without it- while peers record student reactions on observation sheets. Small-group reflection then follows; teachers complete journal prompts and draft quick decision trees that list verbal or non-verbal cues signaling when a switch to L1 might be helpful. The cycle concludes with classroom transfer. Each participant selects one decision cue, tests it during the following week, and posts a brief report that notes changes in comprehension, participation, or classroom climate. The value here lies in concreteness rather than debating abstract principles. In-service EFL teachers, in such trainings, would be invited to handle authentic cases from real classrooms, experiment with alternative moves, and analyze visible outcomes.

Suggestions for Future Research

Considering the limitations identified in this study, several pathways emerge for future investigation, which would advance understanding and further clarify the nuanced role of L1 in EFL classrooms.

Firstly, future research could extend this study by involving a broader and more diverse sample of participants. Given that the current research was confined to four EFL teachers from state secondary schools in Kazakhstan, expanding the scope to include teachers across various regions, different types of educational institutions, and varying levels of educational contexts would provide richer, more generalizable insights. Such comprehensive studies might elucidate whether the patterns identified here are context-specific or reflect broader, possibly universal trends in L1 use within EFL classrooms.

Another promising area of inquiry involves obtaining direct student perspectives on L1 usage. In this study, students' views and experiences were mediated solely through teachers' observations and reflections. Future qualitative research, possibly utilizing interviews or focus groups with students themselves, could more precisely capture their voices, yielding deeper understanding of learner attitudes toward L1 use, their perceived benefits or drawbacks, and its impact on their language learning process. Investigating student perspectives directly would considerably enrich our comprehension of classroom dynamics and provide a valuable dimension currently under-explored in the literature.

Additionally, future research could investigate the longitudinal impacts of strategic L1 integration on students' English language proficiency. Given that this study provides mainly qualitative insights into immediate classroom dynamics and short-term outcomes, longitudinal or experimental designs examining language development over extended periods would offer robust evidence of whether, and how, judicious use of L1 influences long-term proficiency and fluency in English.

Finally, considering the tension revealed in this study between institutional policies and classroom realities, future investigations could adopt a policy-oriented perspective, examining institutional language policies and their alignment (or misalignment) with classroom practices. Studies as this could shed light on how educators navigate tensions between pedagogical best practices and prescribed policies; thus, potentially offer recommendations for policy adjustments that might better support optimal bilingual instructional practices.

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