

Teachers' Practices and Perceptions on the Use of Students' First Languages (L1s) in Multilingual English as a Second Language (ESL) Classrooms:

An Exploration at State Universities of Sri Lanka

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The role of students' first languages (L1s) in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms has long been a subject of debate. While some argue that exclusive English use enhances language acquisition through maximum exposure, others emphasize the benefits of incorporating students' L1s to facilitate comprehensible input, engagement, and willingness to communicate. In multilingual classrooms, however, the use of L1s presents unique challenges, particularly when students speak diverse first languages and teachers lack proficiency in all of them. Given the increasing linguistic diversity in university ESL classrooms, this exploratory study investigates teachers' perceptions and classroom practices regarding the use of students' L1s in multilingual ESL settings at state universities in Sri Lanka. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data to identify general trends with qualitative insights for a deeper understanding. Data were collected through a semi-structured online questionnaire followed by open-ended interviews with university ESL teachers who had completed the questionnaire and volunteered to participate in the interviews. The quantitative data from the questionnaire were analyzed using frequency analysis and cross-tabulation in SPSS while the qualitative data was subjected to thematic analysis. Subsequently, those findings were explicitly clarified with examples, while also making further insights, through the in-depth, thematic analysis of data gathered through interviews. The analysis, as a whole, draws from psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic, psychosocial, and multilingual theoretical perspectives. Findings indicate that teachers' attitudes toward L1 use are influenced by the multilingual nature of their classrooms. Many teachers adhere to a monolingual 'English-only' ideology, opposing L1 use in principle, yet in practice, they often rely on at least one L1 to facilitate instruction. Teachers also employ various pedagogical strategies when integrating students' L1s to support language learning while preserving learners' linguistic identities. Additionally, most teachers recognize the importance of ESL educators having some proficiency in the Second National Language (2NL) to accommodate students from different ethnolinguistic

backgrounds. The study underscores the need for initial teacher training and continuous professional development to address the realities of multilingual ESL classrooms at the university level. Based on these findings, the study calls for a critical re-evaluation of classroom language policies by teachers and curriculum developers, emphasizing that language choices can act as both tools of inclusion and exclusion. The study provides insights for teachers, policymakers, and other stakeholders, advocating for explicit classroom language policies that enable teachers to integrate students' L1s effectively without hesitation or guilt.

Keywords: English as a second language, Multilingual classrooms, Students' first languages