



## THE USE OF *BAHASA INDONESIA* (L1) IN THE INTENSIVE ENGLISH (L2) CLASSROOM

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### Abstract

This study was designed to explore, describe, and explain the use of students' native language (*Bahasa Indonesia*) in the intensive English classroom organized by the Center for Language Development (PBB) of IAIN Syekh Nurjati Cirebon as well as the lecturers' and students' attitudes towards it. It also sought to establish the role that *Bahasa Indonesia* actually played in the class. This study employed a mix-methods design. For confirmations and clarifications it observed 7 classes, surveyed 7 lecturers and 167 students, and interviewed 5 lecturers. Findings revealed that some amount of *Bahasa Indonesia* was used by both the lecturers and the students. Use of the mother tongue was mainly influenced by students' level of English proficiency and the skill of language being taught. Both the lecturers and the students found the L1 useful for teaching and learning culture-related issues and difficult concepts like grammar. However, they also realized that use of the L1, at a certain extent, could be harmful for learning. It can be concluded that the L1 has the potential to be a tool for supporting teaching and learning and it is a lecturer who determines whether use of the L1 helps or hinders English language learning.

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## INTRODUCTION

Monolingualists, those who favor English-only policy, assume that English is best taught and learned through English. They view that the use of English in the English language classroom should be maximized (Polio and Duff, 1994) because only by exposing students to a significant amount of English input can better English proficiency be achieved (Pan & Pan, 2010). Accordingly, L1 should not be used since it deprives students of that valuable input (Ellis as cited in Bouangeune, 2009: 186), interferes students in mastering the target language (Bhela, 1999), and impedes progress or development in the L2 acquisition (Auerbach, 1993; He, 2012). To them, students' mother tongue does not play an essential role (Bhooth, Azman, & Ismail, 2013; Tang, 2002). As a result, English seemingly becomes the only legitimate language to use in the class.

However, even though English only policy has been promoted and become a commonsense practice in second and foreign language instruction, researchers have reported that the use of L1 in SL/FL (L2) classroom is inevitable and even helpful in a number of ways. It is stated that "there is no empirical evidence that L1 has an impeding role in the EFL/ESL classroom" (Bhooth, Azman, & Ismail, 2013: 77). Conversely, mother tongue can serve some functions and has the potential to be a valuable classroom resource (Atkinson, 1987: 241). Furthermore, it is pointed out that exclusion of students' native language may cause "a harmful psychological effect on learners" (Nation as cited in Tang, 2002). Thus, "the rationale used to justify English only in the classroom is neither conclusive nor pedagogically sound" (Auerbach, 1993: 1). Nowadays, researchers have found that using students' native language does not hinder the learning of English (Mirza, Mahmud&Jabbar, 2012) and is even beneficial (Mart, 2013: 13). Therefore, total ban of L1 in the L2 classroom is neither appropriate nor principled.

Current researches have reported that the use of students' native language consistently

yields positive results. In other words, mother tongue has facilitating roles to play in SL/FL (L2) classroom (Freeman as cited in Damra and Qudah, 2012; Mart, 2013; Mirza, Mahmud, & Jabbar, 2012; Nation, 2003; Schweers, 1999). It is a humanistic element by which learners can say what they exactly want to say (Bolitho as cited in Atkinson 1987). Therefore, the use of L1 increases their confidence in expressing ideas (Atkinson, 1987; Auerbach, 1993; Cook, 2001).

In spite of that, overuse of mother tongue is dangerous. Too much employment of students' native language can cause some problems for both teachers and students. When L1 is used more than needed, it may cause dependence on linguistic transfer, failure in observing L2 equivalence, oversimplification in translation, and reluctance to speak English even when they can (Atkinson, 1987: 246). Accordingly, there must be limitations and judicious decisions whether to use or not to use an L1 as a classroom resource.

Interestingly, the extent to which L1 use is said to be appropriate or reaches the overuse level is still debatable. Thus, it is too early to say that the use of L1 helps learning English unless teachers know when, why, and how they should alternate from the target language to students' native language. Atkinson (1987: 241) contends that the potential of the mother tongue as a classroom resource is so great that its role should merit considerable attention and discussion in any attempt to develop a post 'communicative approach' to TEFL. Therefore, this issue needs further exploration.

In Indonesian context, where English is a foreign language (EFL), preliminary observation and own experience have shown that the use of *Bahasa Indonesia* (L1) in the English language (L2) classroom cannot be avoided due to a number of factors. The proportion of the L1 is sometimes higher than that of the L2. Some teachers and lecturers argued that using *Bahasa Indonesia* can live classroom atmosphere. It aids both the process of teaching itself and students' comprehension of the materials especially if most of the students are at basic levels and when the lessons are mainly grammar or structure.

Inspired by studies conducted by Schweers (1999), Tang (2002), Anh (2010), Machaal (2012), and Bhela (1999), this research offers a solution to the problem in the way that it attempts to explore if the use of L1 helps or hinders L2 learning by focusing on lecturers' and students' uses of L1 in the L2 classroom and their attitudes towards its uses in order to provide a reference for the lecturers to be able to use the students' native language judiciously and appropriately. In order to address and answer the issue, the research questions were formulated as the follows:

1. To what extent is *Bahasa Indonesia* used in the intensive English classroom?
2. How frequently is *Bahasa Indonesia* used by the lecturers and for what functions?
3. How frequently is *Bahasa Indonesia* used by the students and for what functions?
4. How do the lecturers perceive the use of *Bahasa Indonesia* in the intensive English classroom?
5. How do the students perceive the use of *Bahasa Indonesia* in the intensive English classroom?
6. What role does *Bahasa Indonesia* play in the intensive English classroom?
7. What are the attitudes of the lecturers and the students if *Bahasa Indonesia* is continuously used?

## METHODOLOGY

This study made use of a mixed-methods design. The participants of the present study were 7 lecturers and 169 students involved in the intensive English course organized by the Center for Language Development of Syekh Nurjati State Islamic Institute (IAIN) Cirebon.

Data were collected by means of classroom observation, questionnaire, and interview. The observation was carried out in order to see and record how the lecturers and the students really used the L1 in the classroom. The questionnaire was distributed so as to obtain attitudes towards and perceptions of the issue. And the interview was

conducted for clarifications of data gained from the observation and the questionnaire.

The data were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Data obtained from the questionnaire were analyzed quantitatively, and data elicited from the observation and the interviews were analyzed qualitatively. Statistical analysis of the questionnaire results are in numerical representation of the lecturers' and the students' use and attitudes towards perceptions of the issue, and analysis from classroom observations and interviews results are in descriptions and explanations. Subsequently, the collected data were organized thematically and systematically according to the statements of the problem. In each theme, data from observation (if relevant), questionnaire, and interviews (if relevant) were compared in order to see how they corroborate or contradict to each other.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### The Amount of L1 Used in the Intensive English Classroom

It is found that both the lecturers and the students used some amount of *Bahasa Indonesia* in the intensive English classroom. The extent of the L1 used by the lecturers was influenced by the students, and vice versa.

Observations revealed that the average proportion of lecturers' uses of *Bahasa Indonesia* to English was approximately 3 to 7. This was influenced by students' level of English proficiency (i.e. be the level is high, mid, or low) and skills of language being taught (be they were listening and speaking skills in Listening & Speaking class or reading and writing skills in Reading & Writing class). The lecturers teaching listening and speaking skills (LTLSS) employed the native language less frequently than the lecturers teaching reading and writing skills (LTRWS) did. While the former used English as frequently as possible in order to stimulate and encourage students to practice the target language, the later used the L1 more frequently in order for the students to comprehend difficult concepts more efficiently.

Majority of the students used *Bahasa Indonesia* at most of the time. The amount of the L1 used by the students was influenced by their background of education (majors). Non English major students (NEMs) employed the L1 more frequently than English major students (EMs) did. Besides, it was also influenced by the lecturers' attitudes realized in language choice, language policy, or some sorts of agreement made in the class. Once a lecturer spoke *Bahasa Indonesia* or "permit" the students to use the native language for a certain purpose, students would feel convenient and thus use the L1 again and again for the same purpose.

This result contradicts to what Phillipson (as cited in Auerbach, 1993: 1) states in his five principles that "English is best taught monolingually" but agrees with Timor's statement (2012: 7) that a foreign language could be learned bilingually.

#### **Functions of L1 Used by the Lecturers**

The lecturers mainly used *Bahasa Indonesia* when talking about difficult concepts/ ideas and some culture-related issues. Precisely, the native language was primarily employed to "explain grammatical points", "crack jokes with students", "discuss cross-cultural issues", "teach cultural/ religious values", and "clarify what the lecturers had explained in order for students to understand it". For complex/ complicated grammatical points, some of the lecturers stated that it usually took longer time to explain grammar in English. Moreover, since most of the students were non English Major Students (NEMs), English explanations were considered to be both time-consuming and ineffective. Therefore, Indonesian explanations were preferred because it is viewed as being more efficient and promoting comprehension. For culture-related issues, i.e. telling jokes, cross-cultural knowledge, and cultural values, most of the lecturers stated that English usually failed to communicate ideas. Since the lecturers viewed that an instruction is not only about transfer of knowledge but also transfer of values and that English did not work for those purposes, *Bahasa Indonesia* was strategically used. In terms of the

the fifth function, it implies that the majority of the students did not directly understand instructions and explanations given in English, and use of *Bahasa Indonesia* helped the students better understand what they were supposed to do during the lesson.

Prior to this research, a number of previously-conducted studies have revealed that L1 serves some functions. Take, for example, Schweers (1990) states that L1 is useful for cracking jokes with students. According to Auerbach (1993), L1 can be beneficial for presenting rules governing grammar, phonology, morphology, and spelling; and discussing cross-cultural issues. Comparing this study with those previous studies, it is found that there are some functions in common. Those are cracking jokes with students, explaining grammatical points, discussing cross-cultural issues. Not mentioned in previous research that L1 could function to teach cultural/religious values.

#### **Functions of L1 Used by the Students**

The students employed the L1 to serve more functions. They mainly used it to "ask the lecturer questions about lesson being taught", "answer questions about the lesson being taught", "talk to each other", "communicate with the lecturer", "progress pair/ group work", and "seek for helps from their friends when responding to questions given by the lecturer". These uses were mainly influenced by their background of education (major), level of English proficiency, and language use policy made, agreed, and applied in the classroom.

#### **The Lecturers' Attitudes towards and Perceptions of L1 Use**

Principally, towards judicious and appropriate use of *Bahasa Indonesia* in the English language classroom, the lecturers showed positive attitudes and perceptions.

Firstly, most of the lecturers agree with the inclusion of the mother tongue into the intensive English classroom. However, they viewed that use of the L1 should be principled. The L1 should be used only for things the students need to comprehend, i.e. culture-related

issues, complex/ complicated concepts or ideas, and things related to students' psychology. For things related to students' English speaking and listening ability, uses of the mother tongue was perceived not to foster English speaking and listening skills. Therefore, English was preferred. The lecturers viewed that only by exposing students to English and practicing the target language intensively can listening and speaking skills be acquired.

Secondly, use of *Bahasa Indonesia* was perceived to be advantageous. Majority of the lecturers perceived the L1 is useful for "teaching difficult concepts" (85.7%), "maintaining contact and good relations with their students" (71.4%), and "conveying meaning efficiently" (57.1%). Additionally, 57.1% of the lecturers viewed that use of the L1 helped students to understand the lesson.

Thirdly, in spite of that, the lecturers realized that use of the L1, at a certain extent, could be disadvantageous. At least 57.1% of the lecturers perceived that using *Bahasa Indonesia* both "reduced exposure to English" and "encouraged dependency on translation."

Lastly, when asked ideal frequency of use of L1, LTLSS and the LTRWS perceived differently. The LTLSS viewed that they need to use English as frequently as possible in order to enable the students to practice the target language. The LTRWS, however, see that the L1 should be used more frequently because they needed their students to understand some knowledge of language they were teaching.

### **The Students' Attitudes towards and Perceptions of L1 Use**

Similarly, majority of the students show positive attitudes towards use of *Bahasa Indonesia* in the English class.

Firstly, findings reveal that the students, even English major students attending the course, perceived that they need some amount of L1 (*Bahasa Indonesia*) to be used by the lecturers in order to "help" them learn the target language (English). This suggests that the mother tongue should not be banned from English language classes.

Secondly, the students wanted their lecturers to use some amount of L1 to "help them progress pair/ group work" (96.6%), "explain linguistic differences between English and *Bahasa Indonesia*" (95.2%), "communicate syllabus/ lesson plan" and "crack jokes with them" (94% each), "explain grammatical points" (93.4%), "clarify meanings of new/ difficult words" (92.8%), "explain errors made by the students" (92.2%), "maintain contact/ good relation with students" (91%), and "give instructions about activities" (90.4%). EMSs and NEMSs perceived the functions differently. The first needed their lecturers to use L1 mainly for explaining grammar-related items; to support and thus improve their speaking ability. The second needed their lecturers to utilize their mother tongue primarily to help and guide them learn English.

Thirdly, at least three fourth of the students perceived that use of the L1 gave all the benefits listed in the questionnaire. The L1 was perceived to be advantageous in the way that it "helped them understand new/ difficult English vocabulary items better" (93.4%), "helped them learn English easily" (91.6%), "helped them say what they exactly want to say" (88%), "made them feel relaxed/ comfortable/ less stressed" (83.2%), and "made them feel less lost in the class" (76.6%). One finding supports Bolitho' (as cited in Atkinson, 1987) argument stating that the L1 is a humanistic element by which learners can say what they exactly want to say: the benefit that increases students' confidence in expressing ideas (Atkinson, 1987; Auerbach, 1993; Cook, 2001).

Fourthly, despite those advantages, use of *Bahasa Indonesia* was also viewed as causing some problems. Majority of the students perceived that L1 use made them "feel that they have yet understood English sentences unless translated into the mother tongue", (71.3%), "dependent on Indonesian translation" (60.5%), "less confident when speaking English" (56.3%), and, as a result, "felt that they were unable to speak English communicatively" (55.7%). The effect could be as serious as what Bhela (1999) states that when L2 learners write or speak in the

target language, they tend to rely on the structure of their native language. If the structures of both languages are distinctly different, there could be a relatively high frequency of errors found in the L2 structure.

### Role of the L1

Both the lecturers and the students show positive attitudes towards the role of *Bahasa Indonesia* in the English language classroom. Both agree that the L1 may be included into the English classroom. In addition, they perceived that inclusion of the mother tongue, as long as judicious and appropriate, helps them teach and learn English.

To the lecturers, *Bahasa Indonesia* is, on one hand, perceived to be a teaching support because it could be a means for humanizing English language instruction. However, injudicious use of the native language, on the other hand, was viewed to be an impediment for students' learning achievement.

To the students, either English major students (EMSs) or non-English major students (NEMSs) did not want *Bahasa Indonesia* to be banned in the English class. Most of them viewed that the L1 may be used when necessary because it, to some extent, helps them learn the target language. In terms of L1 use, 80.8% of the students "disagree" with the exclusion of *Bahasa Indonesia* from L2 classroom, and 89.8 % of the students "agree" with the inclusion of the L1 into the English language class. Regarding the role of L1, 92.82% of the students "agree" that use of the L1 helps them learn English, and 69.4 % of the students "disagree" with the idea that the use of L1 hinders them learn English. Only 30.6% of the students disagree and have no idea if L1 use hinders learning. These findings suggest that some amount of L1 is needed because it is perceived to play a positive role.

This thus supports the idea that the mother tongue has facilitating roles to play in a foreign language classroom (Freeman as cited in Damra and Qudah, 2012; Mart, 2013; Mirza, Mahmud, & Jabbar, 2012; Nation, 2003; Schweers, 1999) and contradict the idea that students' mother tongue does not play an

essential role in the English classroom (Bhooth, Azman, & Ismail, 2013; Tang, 2002).

### Overuse of L1

Results show that all the lecturers disagree with students' continuous use of L1. Surprisingly, some students viewed that lecturers' frequent use of L1 in the L2 classroom is no problem as long as it is purposeful and yields positive results.

In response to the question "*What is your attitude if your students continuously use Bahasa Indonesia even after having sufficient English proficiency?*", all the lecturers disagree with it. Overall, the lecturers' responses suggest that using too much L1 in an L2 classroom is viewed as a bad habit. To them, in order to handle a student who does so, lecturers could use a variety of techniques. However, first of all, a lecturer should know first why a student uses native language despite his/her English proficiency. After that, a lecturer should give "unique" treatment that suit the condition of his/her students. The most importantly, in order to motivate students to speak English, a lecturer should be able to create a "reason" why it is important to practice the target language.

In response to the first question, i.e. "*What is your attitude if your English language lecturer uses Bahasa Indonesia too frequently when teaching Intensive English Course?*", 60.5% of the students "disagree" with a lecturer speaking the L1 too frequently in an English language classroom, and 38.3% of them viewed that it is not a problem. In terms of the second question, i.e. "*What is the potential result of doing so?*", 63.5% of the students perceived that it would be good for learning, and 35.5% viewed that using too much L1 would cause bad results.

All EMSs disagree with lecturers' continuous use of L1. They perceived that frequent use of L1 could reduce exposure to English and diminish students' opportunity to practice using the target language. As a result, students forget their vocabulary and thus their English.

NEMSs divided themselves into those who agree (40.2%), did not have idea (1.3%), and disagree (58.5%) with the issue. Those who

agree viewed that comprehension on what is spoken and convenience in attending the lesson are what makes it does not matter. Those who had no idea basically say that using too much L1 is okay as long as it is purposeful. And those who disagree viewed that lecturers' continuous use of L1 is ineffective. Besides, it can be inferred from their responses that a lecturer using too much L1 is considered to be unprofessional and underestimating students' ability.

Concerning the potential results of lecturers' continuous use of L1, 61.6% of NEMs viewed continuous use of L1 would be good for their learning. 37.1% perceived that it would be bad, and 1.3% considered it as having two possible effects. Those who perceived that it would yield positive results say that continuous use of the L1 promotes comprehension on the lesson. Those who had no idea basically say that overuse of L1 could reduce students' opportunity to practice English and therefore make students unable to pronounce English words correctly. And those who perceived that that frequent use of the mother tongue would yield negative results say that overuse of L1 would impede their English achievement. Students become unmotivated, unchallenged, and unfamiliar with a wide range of English vocabulary, forget their vocabulary, unable to pronounce correctly due to lack of practice. In the end, it lowers their level of English ability.

These findings generally support Atkinson' (1987: 246) view that overuse of L1 may cause dependence on linguistic transfer, failure in observing L2 equivalence, oversimplification in translation, and reluctance to speak English even when they can.

## CONCLUSION

While monolingual approach could work in countries where English is learned as a second language, it seems not to work in Indonesian EFL context unless teaching advanced students. In other words, bilingual approach seems to be more suitable to Indonesian EFL context. The findings have shown that the lecturers teaching

students with low level of English proficiency found that teaching them English through English was not effective. Rather, they viewed that some amount of *Bahasa Indonesia* as useful for facilitating the student to learn the target language. Besides, the students themselves perceived that some amount of L2 helped them learn English. There is not any significant reason why L1 (*Bahasa Indonesia*) should be banned from the L2 (English) classroom.

The use of L1 is not always negative. There are times when the use of L1 support either for teaching or learning the target language. Findings have shown that L1 could serve a number of functions. As long as the mother tongue is given in ideal proportion with judicious decision and judgment whether to use or not to use it, whether necessary or unnecessary, the use of L1 would not hinder students' learning progress or achievement. Conversely, both the students and the lecturers stated that some amount of L1 helps. Therefore, at times when English failed to communicate ideas while the mother tongue is ready to use, there is not a reason to insist on using the target language.

Although the use of L1 is perceived to be useful, but overuse of L1 would be dangerous. The majority of both the students and the lecturers disagree with continuous use of L1. Besides, they viewed that there will be more drawbacks compared to benefits if the L1 is used too much. Therefore, it could be concluded that the mother tongue is beneficial only if given in small amount. If used frequently, it would not result better; rather, it could upset the English language instruction and seemingly turn it into Indonesian language instruction.

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