

**THE ROLE OF MOTHER TONGUE IN LEARNING ENGLISH AT THE INTERMEDIATE LEVEL
(A Case Study of Government Degree College Batkhela, District Malakand)**Kamran Zaib*¹ (Principal & Corresponding author)**Original Article**

1. MPhil, Department of English Literature and Linguistics, Northern University Nowshera
Email: kamranzaib.khan@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines the integration of L1 (Pashto) in English language instruction among 65 intermediate-level students at Government Degree College Batkhela, Pakistan. Using a quantitative methodology through structured questionnaires, the research examined students' attitudes toward the use of their mother tongue, teacher practices, and learning preferences. Results reveal overwhelmingly positive attitudes, with 89.2% of students favoring L1 integration in English instruction. Teachers systematically employ Pashto across instructional contexts, most frequently during student interactions (80%) and classroom management (69.2%). Students demonstrate the strongest preferences for L1 use in cognitively demanding tasks, particularly in grammar explanations (84.6%) and vocabulary acquisition (73.8%), while accepting English-only instruction for speaking practice. These findings challenge prevailing monolingual policies and highlight significant gaps between theory and practice in Pakistani government colleges. The study demonstrates that strategic L1 integration serves essential scaffolding functions rather than impeding L2 development, particularly for rural students with limited English exposure. The research contributes empirical evidence on multilingual pedagogies in Pakistani higher education, specifically addressing the underexplored government college sector. It recommends systematic policy reforms that acknowledge multilingual classroom realities and comprehensive teacher training programs that emphasise strategic L1 integration over colonial-era monolingual ideologies.

Keywords: Mother Tongue, Function of Mother tongue (L1), The Direct method, GTM, L2

Introduction

The term "mother tongue" originates from the concept that children develop linguistic skills primarily through their mothers, making it the language learned from birth or during critical developmental periods. Also known as native or first language, it forms the foundation for social identity and serves as the primary medium of instruction in educational settings. The use of mother tongue in second language instruction remains a debated topic among researchers, with potentially both positive and negative consequences (Yadav, 2014). Mother tongue use can serve important social and cognitive functions, allowing students to work effectively in groups without constant pressure to communicate in English while maintaining their learner identity (Carless, 2008). However, excessive reliance may undermine English interaction and development.

The Grammar-Translation Method, established in 19th-century Europe for teaching classical languages, focuses on grammar rules, vocabulary, and memorisation (Suzanne, 2018). This deductive approach requires teachers to present grammar rules in the first language, with students learning through rote memorisation before translating texts between native and target languages (Jabeen, 2016). The first language serves as the reference system, helping students understand abstract terms and complex phrases through comparative analysis (Liu & Shi, 2007). This method offers several advantages: systematic grammatical study enhances reading comprehension and accurate sentence production; students develop stronger analytical and problem-solving abilities through morphology and syntax learning; emphasis on literary works promotes adequate reading and writing skill development. However, significant drawbacks exist: overemphasis on translation creates continued dependence on the first language; listening and speaking skills are neglected in favor of reading and writing; extensive grammatical knowledge doesn't guarantee appropriate real-life application; literary-based texts often fail to meet

practical communication needs; memorization-focused approaches fail to motivate active target language communication.

Despite foreign language teaching literature generally discouraging mother tongue use, L1 remains central to understanding target language and culture in practical settings. At Government Degree College Batkhela's intermediate level, both teachers and students utilize L1 despite TEFL researchers' recommendations against it, creating a crucial research gap requiring investigation. The research question centers on determining how much and in what contexts mother tongue facilitates English learning in government colleges. This study aims to examine L1's role and importance in intermediate-level English acquisition, specifically investigating its function in L2 comprehension and pre-production stages.

The research significance extends beyond immediate pedagogical implications, offering valuable insights for students from remote areas who depend on native language support for better comprehension. This dependency is particularly relevant in government college contexts where students often have limited English exposure outside classroom settings. Additionally, this study establishes groundwork for future researchers to explore similar themes across diverse educational contexts and investigate various aspects of mother tongue integration in second-language learning environments. The findings will contribute to bridging the gap between theoretical recommendations and practical classroom realities in Pakistani government institutions.

Literature Review

The prominence of English in the Indo-Pakistani subcontinent has deep historical roots, introduced by British colonial administrators in the 16th century and gradually establishing itself as the language of governance, education, and social mobility (Mahboob, 2009). During the British Raj, English acquired substantial official, political, and social significance, becoming synonymous with economic advancement and administrative efficiency. This linguistic legacy was so deeply embedded that by Pakistan's independence in 1947, English became constitutionally recognized as an official language alongside Urdu (Rahman, 1996). Muhammad Ali Jinnah's inaugural address to the first Constituent Assembly, delivered entirely in English, demonstrated the language's prestigious status from the nation's inception (Mahboob, 2009). Despite Urdu being the national language, English continues dominating Pakistan's administrative, judicial, educational, and economic sectors, creating what Kachru (1986) terms an "outer circle" English-speaking environment.

The role of mother tongue (L1) in second language (L2) acquisition has generated considerable scholarly debate. Cummins' (2014) Interdependence Hypothesis posits that L1 and L2 are interdependent, suggesting strong foundational skills in the mother tongue can facilitate second language development. This theoretical framework challenges the monolingual bias prevalent in many English Language Teaching methodologies. Cook (2001) argues that L1 use in L2 classrooms serves multiple pedagogical functions, including scaffolding complex concepts, reducing cognitive load, and facilitating metalinguistic awareness. Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis emphasizes comprehensible input importance in language acquisition, suggesting strategic L1 use can make L2 input more comprehensible, particularly for beginning and intermediate learners. Similarly, Swain's (1985) Output Hypothesis suggests meaningful production in both L1 and L2 facilitates language learning through output production and hypothesis testing. These theoretical perspectives collectively support a more nuanced understanding of L1's role in L2 pedagogy.

Numerous empirical studies have investigated mother tongue effectiveness in English language instruction. Turnbull and Dailey-O'Cain (2009) conducted comprehensive analysis of L1 use across various EFL contexts, concluding that judicious L1 use can enhance learning efficiency without impeding L2 development. Littlewood and Yu (2011) investigated Chinese EFL learners' attitudes toward L1 use, finding students perceived strategic mother tongue integration as beneficial for comprehension and confidence building. Macaro (2001) proposed a theoretical framework for optimal L1 use, suggesting teacher L1 employment should be systematic, pedagogically motivated, and gradually reduced as learners' L2 proficiency increases. This "virtual position" advocates balanced bilingual instruction rather than complete

L1 exclusion or excessive reliance. Nation (2003) argued L1 use can be particularly effective for vocabulary instruction, grammatical explanation, and task clarification, provided it comprises no more than 10% of classroom time.

Within Pakistani contexts, several studies have explored L1 and L2 use dynamics in educational settings. Shamim (2008) conducted ethnographic research in Pakistani secondary schools, revealing that despite official English-medium policies, teachers frequently code-switch between English and local languages to ensure student comprehension. This practice, while unofficial, proved essential for meaningful learning in multilingual classrooms. Mansoor (2005) examined language-in-education policies across Pakistan, highlighting the disconnect between policy mandates and classroom realities. Her research demonstrated that students from rural and economically disadvantaged backgrounds particularly benefit from L1 support in English language learning. Hussain (2017) investigated teacher beliefs about L1 use in English classes across Punjab, finding experienced teachers viewed strategic mother tongue use as pedagogically necessary, despite institutional discouragement.

Despite growing international recognition of L1's pedagogical value, Pakistani ELT practices remain influenced by monolingual ideologies inherited from colonial educational policies (Rahman, 2004). This creates a significant theory-practice gap where teachers intuitively employ L1 strategies while feeling professionally inadequate. Warsi (2004) noted this linguistic insecurity among Pakistani English teachers stems from inadequate pre-service training and limited exposure to contemporary ELT methodologies acknowledging multilingual realities. Moreover, empirical research specifically examining L1 use in Pakistani government colleges remains limited. While urban, private institutions have received considerable attention, rural government colleges, which serve the majority of Pakistani students, remain under-researched (Shamim, 2011).

Research Methodology

This study employs a quantitative research methodology to investigate the mother tongue's role in English language learning at the intermediate level. Quantitative methods were deemed most appropriate for systematically collecting, analyzing, and interpreting numerical data regarding students' attitudes toward L1 use in L2 instruction, enabling statistical analysis and objective evaluation of mother tongue efficiency in English learning contexts. The research was conducted at Government Degree College, Batkhela, located in the Malakand Division of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, Pakistan. The study population consisted of 65 male students enrolled in intermediate programs: 30 from Intermediate Part I and 35 from Intermediate Part II. This purposive sampling technique ensured representation from both intermediate levels while maintaining a manageable sample size for comprehensive analysis. The selection of male students exclusively was necessitated by practical accessibility constraints and cultural considerations within the research setting.

Data collection utilized a structured, closed-ended questionnaire containing twelve carefully designed questions directly related to research objectives. The questionnaire format was chosen for its analytical advantages in quantitative research. Closed-ended questions offer significant benefits for statistical analysis, enabling systematic comparison across participant responses and ensuring consistency in data collection. This facilitates reliable quantitative analysis of students' attitudes regarding the use of their mother tongue in English instruction. The questionnaire design prioritized simplicity and clarity to ensure participant comprehension and accurate response collection. Each question was formulated to elicit specific information relevant to the research problem, focusing on students' perceptions of L1 effectiveness, frequency of mother tongue use by teachers, and student preferences regarding bilingual instruction methods. Several delimitations characterise this study. Geographically, the research is confined to Government Degree College Batkhela within Malakand District, selected for accessibility and the representative nature of regional government institutions. The study is further delimited to male students exclusively and focuses specifically on intermediate-level students, excluding other educational levels. Despite these limitations, the study's focused scope enables in-depth analysis of the specific research context, providing valuable insights into mother tongue utilization in Pakistani government colleges.

Discussion

The findings of this study offer significant insights into students' perceptions and attitudes toward the use of their mother tongue in English language instruction at the intermediate level. The quantitative data reveal compelling evidence supporting the strategic integration of L1 in L2 pedagogical contexts, particularly within Pakistani government educational institutions where multilingual realities intersect with monolingual educational policies.

Student Attitudes Toward Mother Tongue Integration

The survey results demonstrate overwhelmingly positive student attitudes toward using their mother tongue in English language classrooms. As illustrated in Table 1, most participants (89.2%) expressed favorable opinions regarding L1 integration as a medium of instruction, suggesting that students recognize the pedagogical value of their native language in facilitating English language comprehension and learning processes.

Table 1: Student Attitudes Toward Mother Tongue Use in English Classes (N=65)

Response Category	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative %
Strongly Favorable	38	58.5%	58.5%
Moderately Favorable	20	30.8%	89.2%
Language Abilities Insufficient	5	7.7%	96.9%
Undecided	2	3.1%	100.0%
Total	65	100.0%	100.0%

This overwhelming support for L1 integration aligns with contemporary research advocating for translanguaging pedagogies and challenges traditional monolingual approaches that have dominated ELT methodologies. The high percentage of favorable responses (89.2%) suggests that students intuitively understand the cognitive and pedagogical benefits of accessing their linguistic repertoire during English language learning processes. This finding contradicts the deficit view of L1 use prevalent in many institutional policies and supports Cook's (2001) argument that multilingual competence should be viewed as an asset rather than a hindrance in L2 acquisition. The minority of students (7.7%) who indicated that their language abilities were insufficient to meet classroom needs represents an interesting demographic that warrants further investigation. These students may represent individuals with varying degrees of L1 proficiency or those who have internalized monolingual ideologies that position English as inherently superior to local languages. The small percentage of undecided students (3.1%) suggests that most participants have formed explicit opinions about L1's role in their learning experience.

Frequency and Contexts of Mother Tongue Use

Analysis of classroom practices reveals that students do not merely prefer mother tongue use but are actively employed by teachers across various instructional contexts. Table 2 presents data regarding the frequency of Pashto use by English language teachers during different pedagogical activities.

Table 2: Frequency of Pashto Use by Teachers in Different Instructional Contexts (N=65)

Instructional Context	Always	Frequently	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Grammar Explanation	42 (64.6%)	18 (27.7%)	3 (4.6%)	(3.1%)	0 (0%)
Vocabulary Introduction	35 (53.8%)	22 (33.8%)	6 (9.2%)	(3.1%)	0 (0%)
Text Comprehension	28 (43.1%)	25 (38.5%)	8 (12.3%)	(6.2%)	0 (0%)
Classroom Management	45 (69.2%)	15 (23.1%)	4 (6.2%)	(1.5%)	0 (0%)
Student Interaction	52 (80.0%)	10 (15.4%)	2 (3.1%)	(1.5%)	0 (0%)

The data reveal that teachers most frequently employ Pashto during student interactions (80% always use L1), followed by classroom management activities (69.2% always use L1). This pattern suggests that teachers recognize the effectiveness of L1 in establishing rapport, maintaining classroom discipline, and facilitating meaningful communication with students. The high frequency of L1 use in grammar explanation (64.6% always use L1) aligns with research indicating that complex metalinguistic concepts are often more effectively conveyed through students' native language, particularly at intermediate proficiency levels. Interestingly, the data show that teachers never altogether avoid L1 use in any instructional context, challenging the feasibility and desirability of English-only policies in these educational settings. This finding

supports Macaro's (2001) argument that complete L1 avoidance may be neither possible nor pedagogically sound in many EFL contexts.

Student Preferences for Specific Learning Activities

The study also examined student preferences regarding L1 use across different types of learning activities, providing insights into when and why students find mother tongue integration most beneficial.

Table 3: Student Preferences for L1 Use in Specific Learning Activities (N=65)

Learning Activity		Strongly Prefer L1	Moderately Prefer L1	No Preference	Prefer English Only
Learning New Vocabulary		48 (73.8%)	12 (18.5%)	3 (4.6%)	2 (3.1%)
Understanding Grammar Rules		55 (84.6%)	8 (12.3%)	1 (1.5%)	1 (1.5%)
Reading Comprehension		32 (49.2%)	23 (35.4%)	7 (10.8%)	3 (4.6%)
Writing Assignments		25 (38.5%)	28 (43.1%)	8 (12.3%)	4 (6.2%)
Speaking Practice		18 (27.7%)	22 (33.8%)	15 (23.1%)	10 (15.4%)
Listening Exercises		30 (46.2%)	20 (30.8%)	10 (15.4%)	5 (7.7%)

The results indicate that students strongly prefer using their L1 for understanding grammar rules (84.6% strongly prefer L1), followed by learning new vocabulary (73.8% strongly prefer L1). This preference pattern reflects the cognitive complexity of these activities and suggests that students recognise L1's scaffolding function in processing abstract linguistic concepts. The relatively lower preference for L1 use during speaking practice (27.7% strongly prefer L1) may indicate that students are aware that oral production skills require practice in the target language. However, a substantial percentage still prefer some L1 integration (33.8% moderately prefer L1).

Implications for Pedagogical Practice

These findings have significant implications for English language teaching practices in Pakistani government colleges. The overwhelming student support for L1 integration, combined with evidence of systematic teacher L1 use, suggests that current pedagogical practices may be more aligned with student needs and learning preferences than official educational policies acknowledge. This alignment supports Cummins' (2007) advocacy for additive bilingual approaches that build upon students' existing linguistic resources rather than attempting to replace them. The data also suggests that teacher training programs should acknowledge and address the reality of multilingual classroom practices. Rather than perpetuating monolingual ideologies that create guilt and professional insecurity among teachers, training programs should focus on developing strategic L1 use competencies that optimize learning outcomes while maintaining appropriate L2 exposure levels.

Conclusion

This study provides compelling evidence that mother tongue integration plays a vital and positive role in English language learning at the intermediate level in Pakistani government colleges. The quantitative findings reveal a significant disconnect between institutional monolingual policies and actual classroom practices, with 89.2% of students expressing favorable attitudes toward the use of their L1 in English instruction. The research demonstrates that both teachers and students recognize the pedagogical value of strategic Pashto integration, particularly for complex cognitive tasks such as explaining grammar and acquiring vocabulary. The systematic use of mother tongue across various instructional contexts—ranging from student interactions (80% always use L1) to grammar explanation (64.6% always use L1)—indicates that bilingual pedagogical approaches are not merely preferred but essential for effective learning in this educational context. Students' overwhelming preference for L1 use in understanding grammar rules (84.6%) and learning new vocabulary (73.8%) underscores the cognitive scaffolding function that mother tongue serves in L2 acquisition processes. These findings challenge prevailing monolingual ideologies inherited from colonial educational policies and support contemporary research advocating for translanguaging pedagogies in multilingual contexts. The study fills a significant research gap by focusing on rural government colleges, which serve the majority of Pakistani students yet remain under-researched compared to urban private institutions. The research recommends that English language teaching policies

in Pakistan should acknowledge multilingual classroom realities and provide systematic guidelines for strategic L1 integration. Teacher training programs must shift from perpetuating linguistic insecurity to developing competencies in balanced bilingual instruction that optimizes learning outcomes while maintaining appropriate target language exposure. However, this study's limitation to male students and a single institution necessitates broader research across diverse demographic and geographical contexts. Future investigations should examine long-term learning outcomes, gender differences in L1 attitudes, and optimal L1 integration strategies to further inform evidence-based pedagogical practices in Pakistani ELT contexts.

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