



## Learner Perceptions of L1 Use in EFL Settings: Strategic Insights from a Korean University Study

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전략적 모국어 사용, 학습자 인식, EFL 환경, 한국 대학생을 대상으로 한 연구, 트랜스랭귀징 이론

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### Abstract

This study investigated perceptions of Korean EFL learners regarding the use of their L1 in EFL classrooms to understand how L1 use was perceived across different proficiency levels and instructional contexts. The aim was to contribute to the understanding of strategic L1 use as a tool for L2 learning. Surveys of novice and intermediate learners were employed to gather data. The findings revealed that learners generally viewed L1 as beneficial, particularly for complex grammatical structures and vocabulary. However, it was perceived as least necessary in assessment situations. The results highlight the importance of strategic L1 use, indicating that it can facilitate comprehension and reduce cognitive load when appropriately integrated into classroom activities. To achieve this, a balanced approach is necessary, with L1 use strategically reduced during interactive and immersive activities to maximize L2 exposure. Additionally, a preference for L1 use by instructors over learners themselves was noted, emphasizing the importance of teacher guidance in effective use of L1 to enhance learning outcomes. These insights, supported by the translanguaging theory, promote a more holistic and inclusive approach to EFL instruction. This study also underscores the need for further research to explore long-term impacts of strategic L1 use on language proficiency.

## INTRODUCTION

The use of the first language (L1) in the second language (L2) classrooms has its roots in the 19th-century debates between the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) and the Direct Method (DM). These two methods represent opposing philosophies

in language teaching, each with its own set of key features. The GTM, characterized by a focus on grammar rules, translation exercises, memorization of vocabulary lists, and prioritization of reading and writing over speaking and listening, utilized the native language extensively in instruction. In contrast, the DM emphasized speaking and listening, immersive instruction conducted exclusively in the target language, inductive grammar learning, teaching vocabulary through everyday interactions, and avoiding translation between the target language and the native language (Brown, 2007; Howatt & Widdowson, 2004; Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). While these debates may seem traditional, the principles underlying GTM and DM continue to influence modern teaching methodologies, making discussions on the use of L1 versus L2 in the classroom remain relevant.

Throughout the twentieth century, a global perspective on L1 use during L2 lessons was negative as it became widely accepted that only the target language should be used in language classrooms (Carson & Kashihara, 2012; Phillipson, 1992). As a result, until recently, most TESOL materials and manuals largely ignored the use of L1, without even considering translation into L1 to aid learners' understanding as a teaching method.

Later research, however, has shown that the belief that using learners' L1 hinders effective L2 learning and should be avoided is not well-supported by empirical research (Creese & Blackledge, 2010; Shin et al., 2019). Instead, studies have shown that transferring linguistic knowledge and skills from L1 helps in learning L2 even when the languages have few lexical or structural similarities (Cummins, 2007; Gearon, Miller, & Kostogriz, 2009; Saville-Troike & Barto, 2017).

Another noteworthy point, which is often overlooked, is that the interpretation of the results of such discussions should consider the specific teaching and learning contexts from the beginning, that is, whether it is an English as a Second Language (ESL) setting, where learners do not share the same L1, or an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting, where most learners share a common L1, as in Korea.

While in many EFL countries, it may be more tempting to use the shared L1 as an L2 learning tool compared to multilingual classroom, the issue of L1 incorporation versus L2-only instruction during lessons remains ongoing, as exposure to the target language is usually limited to the classroom (Bhatti & Mukhtar, 2017; Daud & Munawir, 2022; Hussain, Khan, & Farid, 2022; Spahiu & Kryeziu, 2021; Wu, Su, Yan, & Zhuang, 2023).

It is also the case in Korea, where educational policies and classroom practices continue to wrestle with the balance between L1 and L2 use. The recognition of the benefits of the DM has led some universities to implement English-Medium Instruction (EMI) policies, requiring a certain proportion of courses to be taught in English. They encourage EMI by allowing absolute grading systems, which do not mandate grading curves, to be used for these courses, to incentivize instructors and students to participate in EMI without the pressure of competitive grading. However, in practice, there is often a gap between policy and implementation. Instructors frequently engage in translingual and trans-semiotizing practices to facilitate meaning-negotiation in EMI contexts (Kim, 2022). Numerous studies, indeed, support this practice by highlighting the advantages of using L1 as a mediating tool in learning and suggesting various forms of code-switching to be effectively employed in EMI settings. Hong (2022) even emphasizes the necessity for linguistic support for EMI instructors, advocating for guidelines or professional development programs that train effective L1 use during EMI instruction.

Given these complexities, the educational focus should not be on whether to use L1 in EFL classrooms, but on when, to what extent, and how to use it effectively. Many recent studies have dedicated themselves to this area of research (DiCamilla & Antón, 2012; Hanif, 2020; Sundari & Febriyanti, 2021; Tanriseven & Kirkgöz, 2021; Taşçı & Aksu Ataç, 2020; Zhao & Macaro, 2016). This study aims to contribute to this body of knowledge by investigating Korean students' perceptions of L1 use in EFL classrooms. Although educational policies are theoretically well-supported, their ultimate effectiveness is primarily determined by how students perceive and experience them, as this directly influences learning outcomes. By focusing on student perceptions in the query for optimal use of L1 in L2 learning, this study seeks to provide insights that can inform more effective and contextually appropriate language teaching and learning strategies, ultimately enhancing educational outcomes in Korean EFL settings.

To achieve this goal, this study surveys novice and intermediate level students to assess their perceptions of L1 use in the classroom. The research questions guiding this study are:

1. How do Korean EFL university students perceive the use of L1 in their L2 learning process?
2. How do students' perceptions of L1 use in L2 classrooms vary according to different proficiency levels and different instructional contexts?
3. In what specific contexts or learning stages do students believe L1 use is most and least effective?

## BACKGROUND

### Supporting Theory: Translanguaging

The focus of recent academic discourse on the medium language in L2 lessons, including this study, has evolved from the dichotomy of L1 vs. L2 usage to exploring the optimal integration of L1 in L2 learning; translanguaging theory provides robust theoretical support for this trend. The concept of translanguaging, first introduced by Williams (1994) and later developed by García (2009), provides a theoretical framework for understanding the dynamic and fluid use of multiple languages in educational settings. Translanguaging is seen as an umbrella term (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021; Heugh, 2021), going beyond mere code-switching by considering the full linguistic repertoire of bilingual and multilingual individuals. This approach recognizes the cognitive, social, and educational benefits of allowing students to draw on all their linguistic resources to make meaning, communicate, and learn.

The original translanguaging approach encompasses two primary perspectives: the strong version, represented by Dynamic Systems Theory (Herdina & Jessner, 2002), and the weaker version, represented by Linguistic Interdependence (Cummins 1979; 1981). The Dynamic Systems Theory posits that multiple language systems interact and influence each other, leading to a comprehensive transformation of an individual's overall linguistic competence. Jessner (2006) articulated this as the interplay of bi- or multiple language systems within an individual, rather than just a simple overlap of two separate language systems. On the other hand, the Linguistic Interdependence hypothesis suggests that cognitive and academic proficiencies developed in one language can transfer to another. This weaker version supports that languages are socially-constructed within boundaries at national and state levels (Cummins, 2017) and recognizes the importance of flexible language use and strategies in the classroom.

Translanguaging theory, particularly in its weaker version, posits that languages in a bilingual individual's repertoire are interconnected and can support each other. This interconnectedness (i.e., linguistic interdependence) facilitates cognitive and academic development by leveraging the strengths of each language. By employing translanguaging strategies, educators can create more inclusive and effective learning environments that acknowledge and utilize students' linguistic backgrounds.

### Previous Studies on L1 Use in L2 Lessons

The use of L1 in L2 classrooms has been widely debated and researched with various studies examining its extent, purposes, and effectiveness in different instructional settings. Specifically, this review mostly includes studies on EFL environments similar to Korea, where exposure to and use of L2 is largely restricted to the classroom, unlike ESL environments where L2 exposure is prevalent in everyday life through various media and social interactions. Additionally, the review emphasizes contexts where students share a common L1, mirroring the homogeneous linguistic background of Korean students. This section categorizes the research into three main areas: the functions of L1 in EFL instruction, perceptions and attitudes towards L1 use, and the impact of L1 on language learning outcomes

#### *Functions of L1 in EFL Instruction*

Tanriseven and Kirkgöz (2021) examined the roles that L1 plays in Turkish EFL classrooms. Their mixed-method study, involving questionnaires and interviews with English teachers, found that while teachers tend to avoid using L1 systematically, they do find it useful for explaining difficult grammar and vocabulary, managing classrooms, giving instructions, checking comprehension, and creating a friendly classroom environment. This underscores L1's facilitative role in classroom management and instruction.

The extent and purposes of L1 use in German L2 classrooms were explored by De La Campa and Nassaji (2009). Through video and audio recordings of classroom interactions, along with instructor interviews, they found that L1 was frequently used to aid comprehension, explain complex grammar points, and manage classroom dynamics. This indicates that despite some disagreements among researchers, L1 can serve significant instructional purposes in the classroom.

A study by DiCamilla and Antón (2012) on collaborative interactions among Spanish learners revealed that L1 serves as a cognitive tool to facilitate collaboration and task completion, especially among beginners. Advanced learners used L2 more frequently, but both groups benefited from L1 use for collaborative tasks. This suggests that L1 can be strategically used to support learners at different proficiency levels.

Hanif (2020) reviewed empirical evidence on the role of L1 in EFL education, highlighting both benefits and potential

drawbacks. The study emphasized the importance of strategic L1 use as a pedagogical resource and suggested that teacher training should include guidance on effective L1 use.

EFL teachers in Jakarta, Indonesia, were the focus of a study by Sundari and Febriyanti (2021), which found that L1 was used noticeably but not excessively for explaining activity objectives, translating, checking comprehension, and giving instructions. Their qualitative study suggests that the strategic use of L1 can enhance learning outcomes without over-relying on it.

Jalaluddin (2022) examined factors influencing L1 use in Indonesian university classrooms, identifying factors such as student mood, proficiency levels, and classroom atmosphere. Teachers used L1 to create a supportive environment and facilitate comprehension, particularly for lower-proficiency students. This suggests the importance of adapting L1 use to the specific needs of learners.

### *Perceptions and Attitudes Towards L1 Use*

In a study by Kohi and Lakshmi (2020), 40 EFL teachers from various countries with different cultural backgrounds were surveyed. Their finding indicated that the majority of teachers exhibited a strong preference for L1 use, primarily for content explanation, translation, and fulfilling affective and social functions. They highlighted the significant role of L1 in facilitating various instructional and managerial functions in EFL/ESL classrooms, influenced by the cultural and educational contexts of the teachers.

Anindya et al. (2022) investigated students' perceptions of L1 use in EFL classrooms through observations and interviews. They found that students viewed L1 positively as it helped them understand and engage with the material, although they agreed on the need for restrictions to ensure sufficient English practice. This suggests that a balanced approach to L1 use can enhance learning outcomes.

Research conducted by Wangdi and Shimray (2022) explored Thai EFL students' perceptions, finding that L1 use was seen as beneficial for explaining complex content and managing interactions, especially for lower-level students. Both students and teachers recognized the advantages of using L1 judiciously.

Beliefs and attitudes towards L1 use in Iranian EFL classrooms were explored by Mayni and Paramasivam (2021). The study revealed that students generally had positive attitudes, believing it helped them understand difficult concepts. Conversely, teachers preferred an English-only policy to maximize exposure. This underscores the need for a balanced approach that considers both student comfort and L2 exposure.

### *Impact of L1 on Language Learning Outcomes*

A quasi-experimental study was conducted by Zhao and Macaro (2016) to compare the effects of L1 use versus L2-only explanations on Chinese-speaking adults' English vocabulary acquisition. They found that the L1-use group had greater vocabulary gains in both immediate and delayed recall, suggesting that L1 can enhance vocabulary learning by providing clearer explanations and reducing cognitive load.

In research carried out by Kim and Choi (2017a), the effects of L1-Korean and L2-English glosses on vocabulary retention were examined among Korean university students across four proficiency levels. Utilizing the Tracing Measure of Retention (Kim & Choi, 2017b) method, which tracks target words through immediate and delayed tests, the research found no significant overall difference between L1 and L2 glosses. However, high intermediate learners showed better performance with L1 glosses. The study also revealed a strong preference for L1 glosses among overall participants, although those exposed to L2 glosses displayed a less extreme preference. This suggests a transition towards direct conceptual processing of L2 words in high intermediate learners. The findings highlight the effectiveness of L1 glossing while emphasizing the need to consider learners' proficiency levels for benefiting from L2-mediated input enhancement.

The effects of L1 use in teaching L2 grammar was evaluated by Şimşek (2010). Employing a quasi-experimental design with pre- and post-tests, the study demonstrated that learners in the L1-assisted group achieved significantly higher improvement and retention compared to those in the L2-only group. These results indicate that incorporating L1 in L2 grammar instruction can lead to more effective and lasting learning outcomes.

Taşçı and Aksu Ataç (2020) conducted a comparison of three types of prewriting instruction among Turkish EFL writing learners: instruction in L2, dialogic instruction in L2, and dialogic instruction in L1. The findings revealed that the group receiving dialogic instruction in L1 during the prewriting stage achieved higher mean scores compared to the other groups.

While extensive research has been conducted on L1 use in L2 classrooms, there is limited investigation into its systematic effects across different proficiency levels within a single cultural context. Our study aims to fill this gap by providing a

comprehensive analysis of L1 use and its impact on learning facilitation, activities, and assessment across different proficiency levels. This research intends to provide preliminary insights for the strategic use of L1 to optimize language learning outcomes and propose guidelines for its judicious use in Korean EFL classrooms.

## METHOD

### Participants

The study involved 224 undergraduate students enrolled in novice and intermediate English courses focusing on reading and writing at a Korean university. Intermediate-level participants comprised the top 60% of first-year students, as determined by their English placement test scores at the university while the remaining 40% constituted the novice-level participants. At the onset of the study, participants were informed about the research objectives and questionnaire items they would answer, and informed consent was obtained to collect and utilize necessary personal information for research purposes. The original sample consisted of 224 participants; however, 11 participants who provided identical responses for all items were excluded from the analysis, resulting in a final sample size of 213 participants.

The final participants were from diverse academic disciplines: Economics (26), Humanities (30), Artificial Intelligence (23), Engineering (27), Art (23), Nursing (31), Medicine (32), and Natural Science (21). Their English proficiency, as indicated by the English section of the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT), averaged Level 3.45, which is representative of the typical English proficiency level among the university's incoming freshmen across these majors.

### Instrument

The questionnaire survey was the primary data collection instrument in this study, conducted through the survey board in the university's Learning Management System (LMS). The questionnaire consisted of 18 items: 16 items on a six-point Likert scale and two open-ended items (See Appendix). The Likert scale items involved four sections: the necessity of L1 in EFL classes (Q1~Q3), the instructors' use of learners' L1 (Q4~Q8), the learners' use of their L1 (Q9~Q12), and the learners' L1 use for assessment (Q13~Q16). The six-point Likert scale ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree), ensuring no neutral option and encouraging participants to take a clear stance. The two open-ended items invited participants to provide voluntary responses regarding ways to improve L1 use in L2 lessons and any additional comments they had about the issue.

The questionnaire items were initially based on Kocaman and Aslan (2018) and Franzese and Cho (2022), then adapted to fit the research direction and environment. For example, Franzese and Cho (2022) focused on online classroom settings, so their question about using L2 for classroom announcements was adapted to "to conduct L2 class activities and give instructions" to better reflect the context of in-person EFL classrooms. Additionally, the items that primarily addressed general L1 use were tailored to specifically investigate its use for various learning components. These adaptations ensured that the questionnaire would generate relevant and context-specific insights.

### Data Analysis

The data analysis for this study was conducted through a series of methodical steps to ensure a thorough evaluation of the responses. Initially, individual responses were extracted from the LMS survey tab, and statistical analyses were performed using SPSS version 24. Descriptive statistics were computed for each item in the questionnaire to summarize general trends and distribution patterns, as detailed in Table 1. Following this, the data were divided into novice and intermediate proficiency groups, and *t*-tests were used to compare the mean scores between these groups.

To align with the research objectives and reflect participants' L2 learning experiences, the data were categorized into four key areas: functional purposes (including facilitation of learning, learning activities, and assessment, labeled as Grouping 1), teaching/learning stages (covering the explanation/understanding stage and activity stage, labeled as Grouping 2), language learning components (encompassing vocabulary learning, grammar and structure, reading comprehension, and listening comprehension, labeled as Grouping 3), and instructional roles (differentiating between instructors' use of L1 and learners' own use of L1, labeled as Grouping 4). This approach provided a comprehensive analysis of how L1 use is perceived and utilized in EFL classrooms.

Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated to ensure the internal consistency of each dimension within the groupings: .886, .828, and .820 for Grouping 1; .862 and .855 for Grouping 2; .595, .899, and .716 for Grouping 3; and .870 and .813 for Grouping 4. The results showed the acceptable range above .65 (Griethuisen et al., 2014) for all dimensions except Vocabulary Learning in Grouping 3.

Additionally, *t*-tests were conducted to compare the mean scores of novice and intermediate groups within each grouping. ANOVA was performed to examine mean differences across the dimensions within each grouping for the overall sample as well as for novice and intermediate subgroups.

As the data analysis primarily focused on quantitative methods using the Likert scale responses, the two open-ended questions were presented as optional, resulting in a very small number of voluntary responses, approximately 10. Given the limited quantity of these responses, they were not subjected to formal qualitative methodologies or thematic analysis. Instead, selective insightful responses were incorporated to complement and reinforce the quantitative findings, particularly in illustrating the practical benefits of L1 use in specific classroom situations. These qualitative insights provided valuable perspectives rooted in personal experiences and offered constructive suggestions for instructors.

## RESULTS

### Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive statistics for the questionnaire items related to the use of learners' L1 in EFL classes are presented in Table 1. The table includes the mean and standard deviation for each item, divided by proficiency level (Novice, 94; Intermediate, 119). For the necessity of L1 in EFL classes, the mean scores for novice and intermediate learners ranged from 3.95 to 4.46. Specifically, Q1, "Do you believe that instructors should know the students' native language (L1) to effectively teach English (L2)?" received mean scores of 4.35 for novice learners and 4.46 for intermediate learners, indicating a general agreement across both proficiency levels about the effectiveness of L2 instructors who are Koreans or at least know the Korean language.

Regarding instructors' use of learners' L1 in EFL classes, mean scores were generally higher, ranging from 4.25 to 4.66. Q5, "Do you find it beneficial when instructors use your L1 to explain L2 grammar, sentence structures, and concepts?" had particularly high mean scores of 4.43 for novice learners and 4.66 for intermediate learners, suggesting strong agreement on the usefulness of L1 in this context. This suggests that learners perceive L1 as particularly valuable for understanding complex grammatical structures and concepts.

For learners' use of their L1 in EFL classes, the mean scores ranged from 4.00 to 4.58, with Q11, "Do you believe it is necessary to learn the meanings of L2 vocabulary through translations into your L1 for better understanding?" receiving the highest mean scores of 4.46 for novice learners and 4.58 for intermediate learners. This shows a consensus on the necessity of L1 for vocabulary learning, indicating that learners perceive understanding L2 vocabulary through familiar L1 meanings as more effective than using L2 definitions or images.

In terms of learners' L1 use for assessment, mean scores ranged from 3.77 to 4.15. Q16, "Should learners utilize their L1 when providing feedback on their learning and course assessments in L2 classes?" had mean scores of 4.11 for novice learners and 4.15 for intermediate learners, showing moderate agreement. This suggests that students find L1 particularly effective when they are evaluating their own learning and providing course feedback, compared to other assessment situations.

Overall, the descriptive statistics indicate that both novice and intermediate learners generally perceive the use of L1 in EFL classes positively across various contexts, with mean scores mostly above 4.00 on the six-point Likert scale. To further investigate the differences between novice and intermediate groups, *t*-tests were conducted for each item. The results indicated no statistically significant differences between the two proficiency levels for all items. This suggests that both novice and intermediate learners have similar perceptions regarding the use of L1 in EFL classes, irrespective of their proficiency level.

**TABLE 1**  
*Descriptive Statistics*

	<i>M</i>		<i>SD</i>	
	Novice	Intermediate	Novice	Intermediate
Items for necessity of L1 in EFL classes				
Q1. Instructors' knowledge of L1 for L2 teaching	4.35	4.46	1.11	1.15
Q2. Importance of instructors using L1 in L2 lessons	4.07	3.95	1.11	1.21
Q3. Necessity of students using L1 for L2 learning	4.00	4.13	.98	1.12
Items for instructors' use of learners' L1 in EFL classes				
Q4. Use of L1 to explain new words and aid vocabulary learning	4.37	4.55	.92	1.07
Q5. Use of L1 to explain L2 grammar and concepts	4.43	4.66	1.08	1.00
Q6. Use of L1 to compare grammar differences	4.51	4.65	1.03	1.09
Q7. Use of L1 to compare collocation differences	4.34	4.52	1.06	1.08
Q8. Use of L1 for class activities and instructions	4.25	4.27	1.09	1.20
Items for learners' use of their L1 in EFL classes				
Q9. Use of L1 for communication during group activities	4.03	4.08	1.24	1.20
Q10. Use of L1 for clarifying or asking about L2 expressions	4.00	4.14	1.14	1.18
Q11. Necessity of L2 vocabulary translation into L1	4.46	4.58	1.16	.97
Q12. L1 translation to improve comprehension of L2 texts	4.31	4.19	1.13	1.08
Items for learners' L1 for assessment				
Q13. Use of L1 for reading comprehension assessments	3.98	3.77	1.08	1.14
Q14. Use of L1 for listening assessments	3.89	3.90	1.18	1.17
Q15. Use of L1 for vocabulary tests	4.04	3.89	1.16	1.14
Q16. Use of L1 for feedback and course assessments	4.11	4.15	1.11	1.23

*Note.* 1-Strongly disagree, 2-Disagree, 3-Somewhat disagree, 4. Somewhat agree, 5-Agree, 6-Strongly agree.

## Grouping Analyses

This section presents the results of the analysis based on different groupings of questionnaire items to understand learner perceptions of L1 use in EFL classes among novice and intermediate learners. The groupings were made based on functional purposes, teaching/learning stages, language learning components, and instructional roles. Each grouping analysis aimed to provide insights into how learners view L1 use across various dimensions within each category.

### Grouping 1: By Functional Purposes

The first grouping analyzes the perceptions of L1 use in EFL classes based on its functional purposes, divided into three dimensions: i) Facilitation of Learning encompasses items related to how L1 aids in understanding complex concepts, vocabulary, and grammar (Q4, Q5, Q6, & Q7); ii) Learning Activities includes the use of L1 during various classroom activities, such as group work and task completion (Q8, Q9, & Q10); and iii) Assessment examines the role of L1 in various assessment contexts, such as vocabulary tests, comprehension evaluations, and course assessments (Q13, Q14, Q15, & Q16). This analysis aims to understand how learners perceive the utility of L1 in different functional contexts of language learning.

The mean scores for each dimension are mostly above 4.00 on the six-point Likert scale, indicating a general agreement

on the usefulness of L1 in EFL classes. Table 2 shows that overall mean scores for the Facilitation of Learning ( $M = 4.51$ ) are higher compared to Learning Activities ( $M = 4.13$ ) and Assessment ( $M = 3.96$ ). This trend is consistent across both novice and intermediate groups. The significant  $F$ -values suggest that there are meaningful differences in how L1 is perceived to be useful across these functional purposes ( $F = 18.227$ ,  $Sig. = .000$  for all participants;  $F = 4.771$ ,  $Sig. = .009$  for novice learners;  $F = 14.416$ ,  $Sig. = .000$  for intermediate learners). Specifically, L1 is seen as more beneficial for facilitating learning than for other dimensions, reflecting learners' preference for using their native language to understand complex concepts and instructions. The mean scores for Learning Activities for all participants ( $M = 4.13$ ), novice learners ( $M = 4.09$ ), and intermediate learners ( $M = 4.15$ ) reflect a consensus on the supportive role of L1 in facilitating collaborative and interactive learning experiences. However, the scores for this dimension are consistently lower than those for Facilitation of Learning, suggesting a more moderate but still positive perception of L1 use in this context. Lastly, the mean scores for Assessment for all participants ( $M = 3.96$ ), novice learners ( $M = 4.01$ ), and intermediate learners ( $M = 3.93$ ) are the lowest among the three dimensions. This indicates a more cautious view of L1 use in assessments. Figure 1 provides a clear visual representation of these comparative results.

The  $t$ -test results comparing novice and intermediate learners for each dimension showed no statistically significant differences for any of the dimensions (Facilitation of Learning:  $t = -1.457$ ,  $Sig. = .147$ ; Learning Activities:  $t = -.432$ ,  $Sig. = .666$ ; Assessment:  $t = .585$ ,  $Sig. = .559$ ), indicating similar perceptions across proficiency levels.

**TABLE 2**

*Comparison by Functional Purposes*

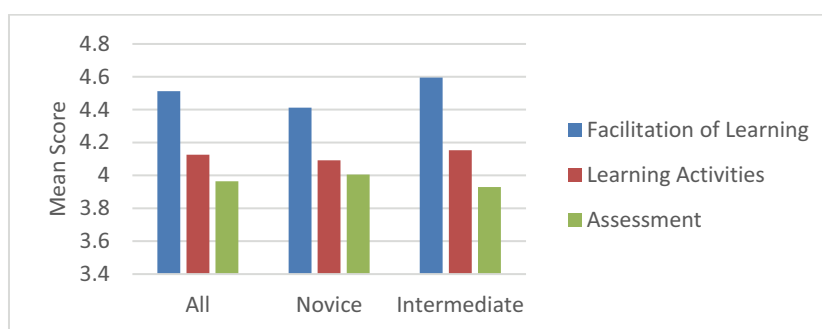
	<i>n</i>	Facilitation of learning <sup>a</sup>	Learning activities <sup>b</sup>	Assessment <sup>c</sup>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
All	213	4.51	4.13	3.96	18.227	.000*
Novice	94	4.41	4.09	4.01	4.771	.009*
Intermediate	119	4.60	4.15	3.93	14.416	.000*

<sup>a</sup> Q4, Q5, Q6, & Q7

<sup>b</sup> Q8, Q9, & Q10

<sup>c</sup> Q13, Q14, Q15, & Q16

\*Significant at .05 level



**FIGURE 1**

*Comparison by Functional Purposes*

### Grouping 2: By Teaching/Learning Stages

The second grouping analyzes the perceptions of L1 use based on different stages of teaching and learning, divided into two dimensions: i) Explanation/Understanding Stage, which includes items related to how L1 is used to explain new language features and concepts and ensure comprehension (Q3, Q4, Q5, Q6, & Q7); and ii) Activity Stage, which involves the use of L1 during interactive classroom activities and tasks (Q8, Q9, Q10, Q11, & Q12). This analysis aims to understand how learners regard the utility of L1 during different instructional stages.

Table 3 and Figure 2 reveal that both novice and intermediate learners perceive L1 use as slightly more beneficial during the Explanation/Understanding Stage, compared to the Activity Stage. This pattern is observed across both novice and intermediate groups. While the mean scores for the Explanation/Understanding Stage for all participants ( $M = 4.42$ ), novice

learners ( $M = 4.33$ ), and intermediate learners ( $M = 4.49$ ) reflect a strong agreement on the utility of L1 for explaining new concepts and ensuring comprehension, the scores for the Activity Stage for all participants ( $M = 4.23$ ), novice learners ( $M = 4.21$ ), and intermediate learners ( $M = 4.25$ ) indicate a slightly lower perception of L1 use during interactive tasks. Yet, significant  $F$ -values were generated only for all participants ( $F = 4.896$ ,  $Sig. = .027$ ) and intermediate participants ( $F = 4.771$ ,  $Sig. = .030$ ), indicating that learners, particularly those at the intermediate level, find L1 more beneficial for understanding and explaining and understanding new language features compared to its use during classroom activities.

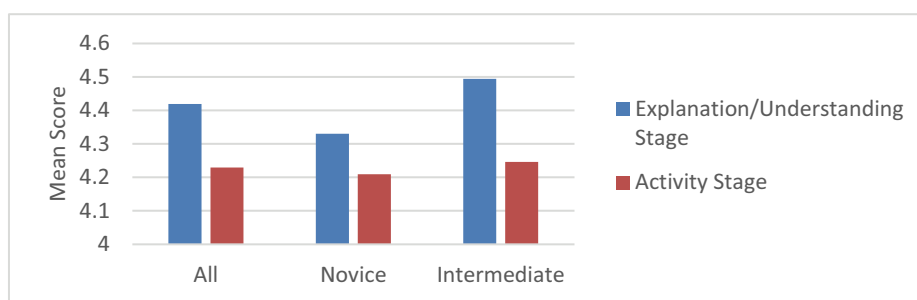
The  $t$ -test results comparing novice and intermediate learners for each dimension showed no statistically significant differences (Explanation/Understanding Stage:  $t = -1.403$ ,  $Sig. = .162$ ; Activity Stage:  $t = -.292$ ,  $Sig. = .771$ ), indicating similar perceptions across proficiency levels.

**TABLE 3**  
*Comparison by Teaching/Learning Stages*

	$n$	Explanation/understanding stage <sup>d</sup>	Activity stage <sup>e</sup>	$F$	$Sig.$
All	207	4.42	4.23	4.896	.027*
Novice	94	4.33	4.21	.851	.358
Intermediate	113	4.49	4.25	4.771	.030*

<sup>d</sup> Q3, Q4, Q5, Q6, & Q7      <sup>e</sup> Q8, Q9, Q10, Q11, & Q12

\*Significant at .05 level



**FIGURE 2**  
*Comparison by Teaching/Learning Stages*

### Grouping 3: By Language Learning Components

The third grouping examines the perceptions of L1 use across different language learning components, divided into four dimensions: i) Vocabulary Learning (Q4, Q11, & Q15), ii) Grammar and Structure (Q5, Q6, & Q7), iii) Reading Comprehension (Q12 & Q13), and iv) Listening Comprehension (Q14). This analysis aims to provide insights into how learners view the utility of L1 in supporting different aspects of language learning.

The results in Table 4 and Figure 3 demonstrate that L1 use is perceived to be most beneficial for Grammar & Structure ( $M = 4.53$ ), followed by Vocabulary Learning ( $M = 4.32$ ), Reading Comprehension ( $M = 4.05$ ), and Listening Comprehension ( $M = 3.90$ ). The significant  $F$ -values highlight meaningful differences in perceptions across these components ( $F = 16.903$ ,  $Sig. = .000$  for all participants;  $F = 4.870$ ,  $Sig. = .002$  for novice learners;  $F = 13.022$ ,  $Sig. = .000$  for intermediate learners). While the mean scores for Grammar & Structure ( $M = 4.53$  for all participants;  $M = 4.43$  for novice learners;  $M = 4.61$  for intermediate learners) indicate a high appreciation for L1 in understanding grammatical rules, the scores for Vocabulary Learning ( $M = 4.32$  for all participants;  $M = 4.29$  for novice learners;  $M = 4.35$  for intermediate learners) suggest a slightly lower yet positive view of L1's role in vocabulary acquisition. The mean scores for Reading Comprehension ( $M = 4.05$  for all participants;  $M = 4.14$  for novice learners;  $M = 3.97$  for intermediate learners) and Listening Comprehension ( $M = 3.90$  for all participants;  $M = 3.89$  for novice learners;  $M = 3.90$  for intermediate learners) are the lowest among the four dimensions, indicating a more neutral perception of L1 use in these areas.

The  $t$ -test results comparing novice and intermediate learners for each dimension showed no statistically significant differences (Vocabulary Learning:  $t = -.482$ ,  $Sig. = .630$ ; Grammar & Structure:  $t = -1.368$ ,  $Sig. = .173$ ; Reading

Comprehension:  $t = 1.250$ ,  $Sig. = .213$ ; Listening Comprehension:  $t = -.055$ ,  $Sig. = .956$ ), indicating similar perceptions across proficiency levels.

**TABLE 4**  
*Comparison by Language Learning Components*

	<i>n</i>	Vocabulary learning <sup>f</sup>	Grammar & structure <sup>g</sup>	Reading comprehension <sup>h</sup>	Listening comprehension <sup>i</sup>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
All	207	4.32	4.53	4.05	3.90	16.903	.000*
Novice	94	4.29	4.43	4.14	3.89	4.870	.002*
Intermediate	113	4.35	4.61	3.97	3.90	13.022	.000*

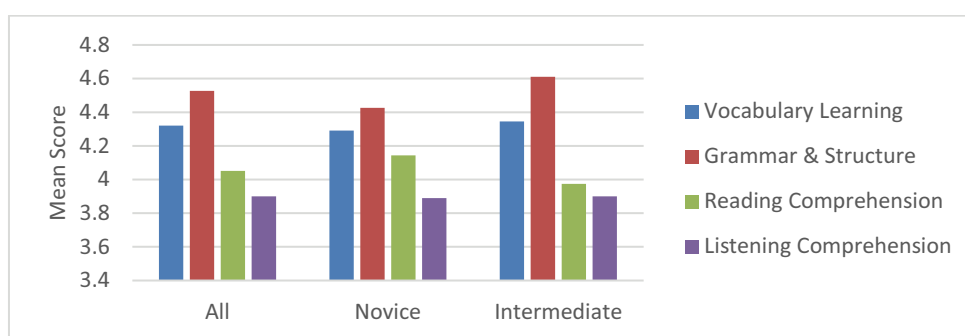
<sup>f</sup> Q4, Q11, & Q15

<sup>g</sup> Q5, Q6, & Q7

<sup>h</sup> Q12 & Q13

<sup>i</sup> Q14

\*Significant at .05 level



**FIGURE 3**  
*Comparison by Language Learning Components*

#### Grouping 4: By Instructional Roles

The fourth grouping analyzes the perceptions of L1 use based on its roles in instruction, divided into two dimensions: i) Instructor's Use of L1, which includes items related to how instructors understand and use L1 to facilitate learning (Q1, Q2, Q4, Q5, Q6, Q7, & Q8), and ii) Learner's Use of L1, which involves items related to how learners use their L1 for learning L2 and interaction (Q3, Q9, Q10, Q11, & Q12). This analysis aims to provide insights into how learners view the roles of L1 use by instructors versus their own use.

Table 5 and Figure 4 show the mean scores for each dimension, indicating that L1 is perceived as more beneficial when used by instructors ( $M = 4.39$  for all participants;  $M = 4.33$  for novice learners; and  $M = 4.49$  for intermediate learners) compared to when used by learners themselves ( $M = 4.19$  for all participants;  $M = 4.21$  for novice learners; and  $M = 4.25$  for intermediate learners). The significant  $F$ -values suggest meaningful differences in perceptions across these instructional roles ( $F = 5.758$ ,  $Sig. = .017$  for all participants;  $F = 4.182$ ,  $Sig. = .042$  for intermediate learners). These results indicate that learners, especially those at higher proficiency levels, find instructor-led use of L1 more effective for their learning process.

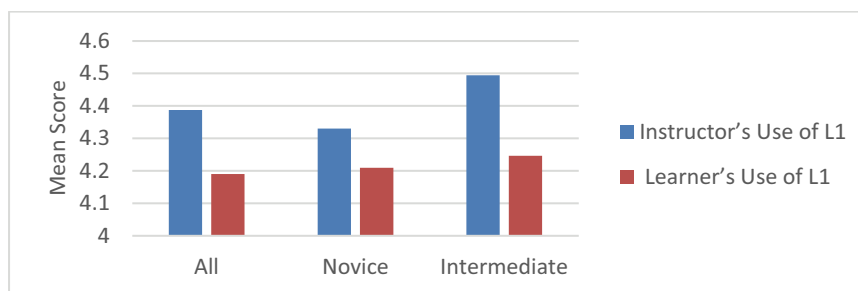
The  $t$ -test results comparing novice and intermediate learners for each dimension showed no statistically significant differences (Instructor's Use of L1:  $t = -.891$ ,  $Sig. = .374$ ; Learner's Use of L1:  $t = -.468$ ,  $Sig. = .640$ ), indicating similar perceptions across proficiency levels.

**TABLE 5***Comparison by Instructional Roles*

	<i>n</i>	Instructor's use of L1 <sup>j</sup>	Learner's use of L1 <sup>k</sup>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
All	207	4.39	4.19	5.758	.017*
Novice	94	4.33	4.21	1.806	.181
Intermediate	113	4.49	4.25	4.182	.042*

<sup>j</sup> Q1, Q2, Q4, Q5, Q6, Q7, & Q8<sup>k</sup> Q3, Q9, Q10, Q11, & Q12

\*Significant at .05 level

**FIGURE 4***Comparison by Instructional Roles*

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study add to the ongoing discussion on the use of L1 in EFL classrooms, providing valuable insights that support the judicious and strategic use of L1 (de Jong, 2002; Erling et al., 2017; Ibrahim, 2023; Wigglesworth, 2002). The overall positive perception of L1 use among both novice and intermediate learners aligns with previous research suggesting that L1 can be a valuable pedagogical tool when used appropriately.

### Learners' General Attitudes Towards L1 Use in L2 Classes

The survey results revealed several key observations, derived from mean comparisons in Table 1, regarding learners' general attitudes towards the use of L1 in L2 classes. Firstly, learners across both proficiency levels perceive L1 as particularly valuable for understanding complex grammatical structures and concepts (Q5 and Q6). The use of L1 in explaining difficult grammar points can help reduce cognitive load and enhance comprehension. This finding is consistent with studies by Creese and Blackledge (2010) and Bhooth et al. (2014), which emphasize a flexible bilingual approach and the role of L1 in scaffolding learners' understanding of difficult L2 content. Instructors should therefore consider using L1 strategically to explain challenging grammar points, ensuring that learners build a solid foundation for further L2 development.

Secondly, there was a general agreement about the effectiveness of L2 instructors who are Koreans or at least know the Korean language (Q1 and Q2). This finding aligns with Wang et al. (2020), who reported no significant differences in stakeholders' perceptions of native English-speaking instructors versus local instructors, indicating that native-speaker identity alone does not command respect. Instead, the knowledge of learners' L1 is seen as a positive attribute for L2 instructors in facilitating English learning. The ability to communicate in L1 allows instructors to provide clearer explanations, which can be particularly beneficial in understanding complex grammatical structures and new vocabulary, while simultaneously moderating learners' cognitive overload and emotional stability, as reflected in the participants' responses below (Excerpts 1 and 2). The comments were originally in Korean and have been translated by the researchers to preserve their original meaning (hereinafter).

**Excerpt 1:** *When I take classes in English, understanding the professor's explanation is secondary; I have to focus all my attention on comprehending the words themselves. So, if the content is not something I already know, even if I understand the words, I have to chew over the content again to understand it, which makes me miss the next part of the*

*explanation.* (Participant H.B., Humanities major, intermediate level)

**Excerpt 2:** *My TOEIC score is quite high, but still, taking classes in English is burdensome. Moreover, it feels very unnatural and uncomfortable for a Korean professor to teach Korean students in English. However, I choose such classes because of the absolute grading system.* (Participant J.Y., Medicine major, intermediate level)

This implication extends beyond L2 classrooms, suggesting that policies in many Korean universities, which mandate a portion of courses to be taught in English and offer privileges such as absolute grading instead of relative grading, might need to be applied more flexibly according to teaching and learning contexts. The discussion around using L1 in L2 instruction inherently assumes the presence of local English teachers who can leverage their knowledge of the learners' native language. Ultimately, learners provided consistent responses, indicating a coherent perception of the effectiveness of L1 use in their learning process, regardless of how the questions were framed.

Thirdly, learners find understanding L2 vocabulary through familiar L1 meanings more effective than using L2 definitions or images (Q4). This suggests that translations into L1 can facilitate better vocabulary learning, as learners can relate new L2 words to their existing L1 knowledge. This approach can be particularly helpful for beginners who might struggle with L2-only definitions. This finding is consistent with Sato and Angulo (2020), who found that using learners' L1 was associated with greater gains in L2 vocabulary knowledge. Zhao and Macaro's (2016) quasi-experimental study with Chinese-speaking adult learners also demonstrated that participants who received L1 explanation showed significantly better vocabulary acquisition compared to those who were taught using L2-only methods. These studies support the idea that strategic use of L1 can enhance vocabulary learning by providing clearer and more accessible explanations.

Fourthly, while the mean scores for the use of L1 in assessment situations were generally the lowest, indicating that learners overall do not see the necessity of using L1 for assessments (Q13, Q14, and Q15), there were still notable exceptions. Specifically, students find L1 effective when they are evaluating their own learning and providing course feedback (Q16). The use of L1 in self-assessment may allow for clearer expression of thoughts and more accurate self-reflection, contributing to a better understanding of their own progress and areas needing improvement. This result suggests that learners have relatively less resistance to using L2 in formal assessments, but still appreciate the clarity and accuracy that L1 can provide in self-evaluation and feedback processes.

## Recommendations Based on Grouping Analyses

This section presents the findings from the statistical analysis of the survey data, providing evidence-based recommendations for the use of L1 in EFL classrooms. The results from the grouping analyses indicate significant differences in perceptions based on functional purposes, teaching/learning stages, language learning components, and instructional roles.

Firstly, as for the functional purposes of L1 use, L1 is seen as more beneficial for facilitating learning than for learning activities and assessments. This reflects learners' preference for using their native language to understand complex concepts and instructions. The role of L1 in facilitating learning aligns with Cummins' (2007) theory of common underlying proficiency, which posits that languages are connected, not separate, at cognitive levels, therefore, linguistic knowledge developed in one language can positively transfer to another. By using L1 to explain difficult concepts, instructors can bridge gaps in understanding and make L2 content more accessible. This strategic use of L1 can help learners build a stronger foundation in L2, particularly when dealing with abstract or challenging material.

Secondly, regarding teaching and learning stages, learners find L1 slightly more beneficial during the Explanation/Understanding Stage compared to the Activity Stage, suggesting that L1 is particularly valued for clarifying new language features and ensuring comprehension. This aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the importance of scaffolding in learning. Using L1 during the initial stages of instruction can provide the necessary support for learners to grasp new concepts and structures, reducing cognitive overload and enhancing comprehension. As learners become more comfortable with the material, the gradual reduction of L1 use can encourage greater engagement with L2 during interactive and productive activities.

Thirdly, considering language learning components, L1 is perceived to be most beneficial for Grammar & Structure, followed by Vocabulary Learning, Reading Comprehension, and Listening Comprehension. This hierarchical perception indicates that learners find L1 most useful for understanding complex grammatical rules, which often involve abstract thinking and detailed explanation. It shows that L1 can serve as a cognitive tool to facilitate L2 learning, particularly in understanding intricate grammatical structures (Swain & Lapkin, 2000). It also aligns with Sagarra and Alba (2006), who reported that linking new L2 vocabulary to L1 equivalents can aid recall and the keyword method enabling a deeper process

through form and meaning matching yielded better retention. This is also supported by the following participant's comment (Excerpt 3).

**Excerpt 3:** *When explaining the verb “reach” in class, the instructor said, “In Korean, you might think of ‘reach’ as ‘어디에 도착하다,’ so you might be tempted to say ‘reach at.’ However, the verb ‘reach’ inherently includes the meaning of ‘at,’ so it can directly take an object. This is different from the verb ‘arrive,’ which does not include the meaning of ‘at,’ and thus requires a preposition like ‘at’ to take an object.” This explanation made me truly understand the difference between transitive and intransitive verbs. I believe this was possible because the class was conducted in Korean.* (Participant H.K., Economics major, novice level)

On the other hand, the relatively lower perceived benefits for reading comprehension suggest that this skill might require more immersive L2 exposure to develop effectively. While using L1 translation may be an efficient way to explain the structure and meaning arrangements of English sentences and paragraphs, this perception could be seen as a call to re-evaluate traditional L2 teaching practices that heavily rely on L1 translation. There may be a need to shift towards more integrated and immersive L2 reading strategies that encourage direct engagement with the target language, fostering a more authentic and effective learning experience.

Fourthly, in terms of instructional roles, L1 is perceived as more beneficial when used by instructors compared to when used by learners themselves, indicating the importance of teacher guidance in effective L1 use. This underscores the role of instructors as mediators of knowledge, as described by Hanif (2020), who highlights the teacher's role in guiding classroom discourse and supporting cognitive development by using L1 strategically as a pedagogical recourse in classrooms. Instructors can provide clear explanations, manage classroom interactions, and support individual learner needs more effectively using L1. This guided use of L1 can create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment reducing learner anxiety, allowing learners to navigate the complexities of L2 acquisition with greater confidence. Yet, there was the opinion that minimizing L1 use could be beneficial (Excerpt 4). Thus, a flexible and adaptive use of L1, taking into account such minority opinions, is essential to balance offering necessary support with maximizing opportunities for L2 exposure.

**Excerpt 4:** *Since the purpose of the class is to improve English skills, it seems beneficial to have many opportunities to listen and speak in English. Except for very beginners, it would be good to use English as much as possible in English classes.* (Participant Y.E., Humanities major, novice level)

A noteworthy point in the grouping analyses is the *t*-test results comparing novice and intermediate learners. They showed no statistically significant differences in learner perceptions of L1 use across all dimensions. While many studies suggest that the use of L1 in L2 instruction is particularly beneficial for beginner level learners, indeed, learners at different proficiency levels have similar views on the role and effectiveness of L1 in EFL classes. These findings reinforce the idea that strategic L1 use can support learners at various stages of their language learning journey.

## CONCLUSION

This study provides insights supporting the strategic use of L1 in EFL classrooms. The findings indicate that both novice and intermediate learners perceive L1 as beneficial in various instructional contexts, particularly for facilitating learning and understanding complex grammatical structures and vocabulary. The study underscores the importance of the context-specific L1 use, suggesting that its effectiveness depends on how, when, and to what extent it is integrated into classroom learning.

The results suggest that learners appreciate the use of L1 by instructors, especially for explaining complex concepts and vocabulary. For example, the survey results indicated that learners rated the use of L1 for explaining complex grammar concepts highly. This positive perception was consistent across both novice and intermediate learners, with no statistically significant differences between the two groups. They also value L1 for self-assessment and feedback, indicating that L1 can enhance learners' ability to reflect on their learning progress. While L1 is beneficial for understanding new material, its use should be carefully balanced to avoid over-reliance, especially during interactive and immersive activities.

Based on these findings, educators can utilize these dimensions as guidelines for determining the appropriate extent of L1 use in various L2 classroom situations. By understanding how learners' perceptions of L1 use differ according to these specific categories, instructors can make informed decisions about when and how much L1 should be integrated into their

teaching practices. For example, L1 may be used more extensively for explaining complex grammatical concepts (functional purposes) or during initial stages of instruction (teaching/learning stages) to facilitate comprehension. Conversely, its use might be minimized in more interactive activities or assessments to ensure adequate L2 exposure and practice. This nuanced approach allows for a balanced and strategic use of L1, enhancing overall instructional effectiveness and supporting learners' language learning processes. These guidelines could also be included in professional development programs that train effective L1 use during EMI instruction, as suggested by Hong (2022).

While this study highlights the positive perceptions of L1 use among learners, it also acknowledges several limitations. The sample was limited to Korean EFL learners at a specific university, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the classification of intermediate learners, comprising the top 60% of students, may have included a wide range of proficiency levels, potentially affecting the results regarding perceptions by proficiency. Future research should include a more diverse sample from different educational contexts and refine the classification of proficiency levels to validate these results more accurately. Moreover, the study relied on self-reported data, which might be influenced by learners' subjective perceptions. Another critical point to note is that the study included a limited number of open-ended responses, which, while providing valuable qualitative insights, may not fully represent the broader range of learner experiences and perceptions. Encouraging more learners to participate in the open-ended questions, while also combining other qualitative methods such as classroom observations and interviews with quantitative surveys, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of L1 use in EFL settings. In addition, research exploring the long-term impacts of strategic L1 use on language proficiency and learner autonomy would be instrumental in offering valuable directions for the future of Korean EFL education. Investigating how different instructional approaches to L1 use affect learners' motivation and engagement could also provide deeper insights. Furthermore, research on the perspectives of Korean EFL instructors regarding L1 use, and how it influences their teaching practices, would be beneficial in developing more effective language teaching strategies tailored to the Korean EFL context.

In conclusion, this study adds to the ongoing debate on L1 use in EFL classrooms by offering indications that support its strategic integration. By focusing on learners' perceptions and systematically analyzing these across various dimensions, the study offers valuable insights that can inform more effective and contextually appropriate language teaching strategies in Korean EFL settings. Incorporating translanguaging, which encompasses concepts such as codeswitching or codemixing, as a means to find the appropriate extent of L1 use can further enrich the classroom dynamics, promoting a more holistic and flexible approach to language instruction as one participant insightfully illustrated (Excerpt 5).

**Excerpt 5:** *When I watch YouTube shows featuring Korean-American celebrities, they often mix Korean and English. It's somewhat funny, but it seems helpful for learning English. If they continuously spoke in English, there would be many parts I might miss, but I can relax when they speak in Korean and focus when they switch to English, which helps me understand almost everything. Especially when they use English words in Korean sentences, the meaning and context of those words stick in my memory for a long time. English classes would be more enjoyable if they were conducted in this way. (Participant K.E., Medicine major, intermediate level)*

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Q7. Do you find it beneficial when instructors use your L1 to compare differences between your L1 and L2 in terms of collocation? ① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥

Q8. Do you find it beneficial when instructors use your L1 to conduct L2 class activities and give instructions? ① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥

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Items for learners' use of their L1 in EFL classes

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Q9. Do you find it beneficial for L2 learning to use your L1 for communication during pair/group activities in L2 classes? ① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥

Q10. Do you find it beneficial for L2 learning to use your L1 for clarifying or asking questions about L2 expressions? ① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥

Q11. Do you believe it is necessary to learn the meanings of L2 vocabulary through translations into your L1 for better understanding? ① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥

Q12. Do you think that translating L2 texts into your L1 helps you comprehend them more accurately? ① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥

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Items for learners' L1 for assessment

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Q13. Should L1 be used for L2 reading comprehension assessments to assist learners' understanding and answering questions? ① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥

Q14. Should L1 be used for L2 listening assessments to assist learners' understanding and answering questions? ① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥

Q15. Should L1 be used for L2 vocabulary tests to ensure learners' clear understanding of words? ① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥

Q16. Should learners utilize their L1 when providing feedback on their learning and course assessments in L2 classes? ① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥

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Open-ended items (optional)

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Q17. In what ways do you think the use of L1 can be improved in L2 classes?

Q18. Please share any additional thoughts or suggestions about the use of L1 in your L2 learning.

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Note. 1-Strongly disagree, 2-Disagree, 3-Somewhat disagree, 4. Somewhat agree, 5-Agree, 6-Strongly agree.