

## **IDENTIFYING THE USE MOTHER TONGUE IN EFL CLASSROOM: AN OBSERVATIONAL STUDY**

**Noor Wahdi Tamami**

Universitas Islam Indonesia  
email: 16322093@students.uii.ac.id

### **Abstract**

This study investigates how instructors use their mother tongue in an EFL classroom, which identifies how the instructor uses the mother tongue in the EFL class, regarding its frequency and function. Observational study methods are used in this study. In this study, the researcher observed an instructor in a foreign language class at a junior high school in Yogyakarta. Furthermore, an observation form framework is used to stay focused and the information captured is specific. This study uses an observational framework developed by Paker & Karaağaç (2015). Based on research findings that the use of mother tongue in foreign language classes uses 6 language functions. Of the 6 language functions, the use of the mother tongue is very often used with different purposes but still the mother tongue has a role as a liaison for the target language in order to achieve learning objectives in the classroom. The use of the mother tongue in the classroom is beneficial during the learning process delivered by the teacher where the mother tongue is not something that interferes but maximizes the learning process.

**Keywords:** *Mother tongue, EFL classroom, Observational study*

### **Background**

The use of mother tongue by teachers and learners has become an integral part of teaching a second language or foreign language in various contexts. According to Paker & Karaağaç (2015), the use of the target language in the classroom is of course very important but the use of the mother tongue will never be separated because the mother tongue can be a link between the target language and the mother tongue. Mother tongue also allows children to learn in an environment where they can understand, expand and channel their ideas, as well as strengthen and build their social relationships (Timuçin & Baytar, 2015).

According to Boon (2011), in the context of teacher education in Timor Leste, mother tongue is widely used at homes, markets, leisure, churches, and government as many as 56-87%. In the findings, it is explained that the mother

tongue (Tetum) is used more often than other foreign languages. Tetum has a broad 'Lingua Franca' function. The participants of this research confirmed that the use of mother tongue to provide explanations while teaching is indeed very helpful. Furthermore, Perfecto (2020) adds that the use of mother tongue in a classroom plays an important role in the process of teaching English. Mother tongue used as a medium of instruction can help students to understand the material better. Teachers are aware that delivering material in target language is possible to cause some problems because most of the students are multilingual, and English is not their first language. Therefore, switching to the mother tongue can make the learning process more efficient and can empower students to be more active in participation when learning a language.

A study conducted by Vattøy & Gamlem (2020) shows that teachers tend to use their mother tongue more when in

one class most students find it difficult to understand foreign languages. In addition, teachers use more mother tongues for the freshmen. Furthermore, summative and formative assessments carried out by the teacher in the use of mother tongue and foreign language. If designed carefully and conducted optimally, the use of mother tongue and foreign language in a classroom is actually interconnected. The role of using mother tongue can make students learn a lot in their environment such that students can understand, expand and be able to provide ideas (Jones & Mutumba, 2019). When the use of mother tongue is applied in the classroom, their understanding of a material improves and they can be more active and independent. According to Timuçin & Baytar (2015), in the case of foreign language learning, the teacher uses code-switching as one of the most frequently used strategies in the foreign language learning process in the classroom which has the function of translating, checking to understand, explaining procedures, providing directions, explaining grammar and managing the class.

There are several previous studies that focus on examining the use of mother tongue in a classroom. Seid (2019) discussing elementary school students in grades 1 to 4 the use of mother tongue is very important, but for the next stage whether the use of mother tongue is still necessary or not. Ma (2019) found that the use of the first language or mother tongue in the class consisting of adult immigrants is still not optimal even though in every meeting the use of mother tongue is still used. Furthermore, Pavón Vázquez & Ramos Ordóñez (2019) if the use of mother tongue is not controlled, it will make foreign language learning less and not in accordance with the learning target. However, none of the studies above focus specifically on the benefit of implementing the use of mother tongue in a language classroom in an EFL context. Therefore,

this study aims to identify the function of using the mother tongue in the EFL classroom and how many times it is used during the learning process.

### **Research Methods**

This research uses observation to collect data. Observation is a part of qualitative research method. During the observation, the researcher observe and identify the frequency and function in the use of the mother tongue in the EFL classroom so that the data results can be maximized. Through observation where researchers can document and reflect sequentially on activities and interactions with research subjects. Observation is a technique in data collection that has characteristics such as, not limited to people and can be carried out on other objects such as an event, nature, or nature. In the stages of observation, it includes observing things with the problem being studied, identifying aspects that are the center of attention, recording, and restrictions on objects (Nugrahani, 2014).

The place to be researched is in one of the junior high schools in the city of Yogyakarta. The class is an English class with 20 students and one teacher teaching. This is because the research sites are mostly Javanese, most of whom communicate and speak their mother tongue or their first language is Javanese and Bahasa. For interactions outside the classroom, the use of the Java language is more frequent. As for the use of Bahasa, it is more often done during class learning.

The participant who took part in this research was an English teacher who also taught at a private junior high school in the city of Yogyakarta and also a student who took English lessons. The first participant was a teacher named Nami (pseudonym), she graduated from a state university in Yogyakarta with a bachelor's degree. For now she was a teacher at a

private junior high school where she has taught at that school for almost seven years. The first language itself was Javanese which was used in everyday life but when learning English, Javanese and Indonesian are also used. The second participant was the students who were taking part in an English class.

The instrument of observation is assisted by a framework, namely the observation form. What is used during observation to stay focused and the information captured is specific

**Table 1. Observation Form**

No	Language functions Paker & Karaağaç, (2015)	Definition	Tally	Evidence
1	To make the topic/meaning clear	The teacher gives examples, explains, and makes additional explanations to make students understand the topic to be delivered.		
2	To present & explain the topic	Presenting and explaining the topic means that the teacher gives explanation orally through oral presentation by making use of some supporting technologies such as ppt or other media.		

No	Language functions Paker & Karaağaç, (2015)	Definition	Tally	Evidence
3	To give feedback	Feedback is given so that students and teachers can understand each other.		
4	To teach the meaning of new vocabulary	To teach the meaning of new vocabulary a teacher tries to explain through drawing or acting out.		
5	To translate sentences that the instructor utters or those in the book/listening text without considering if it is understood or not	So that students' understanding of the topic can be clearer.		
6	To give/explain tasks or instructions	To give/explain assignments or instructions to students, a teacher will use language that is easy to understand for students to avoid complaints or confusion.		

Data collection is done offline. This stage is carried out by classroom observation and recorded during the

learning process for one hour and is carried out once. Video and sound recordings will be made during the class observation process to complete the data. From the recording, a transcript will be made to make it easier to categorize the data.

Data analysis was carried out using memos. According to Birks et al., (2008), the use of memos can be used to improve and research results in a qualitative study. Memos can clarify thoughts about the research topic as well as the data that has been retrieved and can also explore in-depth and detailed processes in coding and data categories. The memo function can also map activities in research, extract meaning from data, maintain momentum, and open communication. Data analysis uses memos to categorize the use of mother tongue in the learning process of foreign languages in the classroom. Memoing is a way of describing something that is happening and sorting research data (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009).

### **Finding & Discussion**

In this study, to collect the data, a observational checklist by Paker & Karaağaç, (2015) was used. It contained 6 language functions, which are: 1. to make the topic/meaning clear, 2. To present & explain the topic, 3. To give feedback, 4. To teach the meaning of new vocabulary, 5. To translate sentences that the instructor utters or those in the book/listening text without considering if it is understood or not, 6. To give/explain tasks or instructions. After conducting the observation, the researcher discovered that one language function did not appear during the teaching learning process, namely to translate sentences that the instructor utters or those in the book/listening text without considering if it is understood or not. Among all language functions above 5 appeared with the use of mother tongue. The most frequent language function with the use of mother tongue that occurred during the Teaching

& Learning activity is to make the topic/meaning clear with the number of 31 occurrence. The second most frequent is to give/explain tasks or instructions with the number of 10 occurrence. The third most frequent is to teach the meaning of new vocabulary with the number of 8 occurrence. The fourth most frequent is to give feedback with the number of 2 occurrence. The fifth most frequent is to present & explain the topic with the number of 2 occurrence.

The study findings are elaborated in this section. The discussion focuses on the answer to one research question which is analyzing the use of the mother tongue in the classroom. Mother tongue in this context refers to Javanese language and Bahasa Indonesia. However, the data shows that the teacher and students mostly used Bahasa Indonesia instead of Javanese language to help them with their communication. Participants in the study were teachers who taught English using their mother tongue as translators. Mother tongue is often used by teachers when students have difficulty in understanding a foreign language or English in a lesson. Especially when explaining learning objectives, giving instructions, and giving feedback. Then, mother tongue also helps a teacher and student when they are interacting. Throughout the teaching process, the researcher found that there were several uses of the mother tongue used by the teachers in the English class. The researcher presented the use of the mother tongue during the teaching process in the classroom as follows:

### **The use of mother tongue to make the topic/meaning clear**

The use of mother tongue to clarify the topic or its meaning appears for 31 times. This language function often appears and is also often used in the teaching process. Its purpose is to clarify what the teacher says to students, which

started with English and then continues with the mother tongue, so that what is conveyed by the teacher in English can be understood by students. This is in accordance with Paker & Karaağaç (2015) who stated that mother tongue can never be separated from target language learning. Timuçin & Baytar (2015) examined that the teacher uses language as one of the strategies often used in foreign language classes which has the functions of translating, checking to understand, explaining procedures, giving directions, explaining grammar and managing the class. One of the example of the use of mother tongue in the classroom to make meaning clear is as follow:

*'...like what we have learned in the previous meeting ... seperti yang kita pelajari di pertemuan sebelumnya' (TMC01)*

Before introducing a new topic, the teacher tried to link back to what the students had learned in the previous meeting. It aimed to make students understand that the materials they learned were inter-connected in every meeting. After making an attempt to linking the materials, the teacher tried to repeat the instruction in Bahasa Indonesia as it is the students' first language. The teacher did similar thing repeatedly in order to clarify the meaning for students. Students who mostly are not yet fluent in English were assisted with the use of mother tongue in instruction.

### **The use of mother tongue to present and explain the topic**

After introducing the topic and ensuring that it is clear enough for the students to understand, the teacher started to explain the material more deeper. In this occasion, the teacher tended to speak longer in their first language. It is because explaining material or topic require more detailed description and elaboration. However, longer use of first language does

not mean that the language function occurs more frequently. Quantitatively, in one meeting, the teacher only used the language function to explain the topic twice. The reason is that during the whole meeting, teacher did not explain much of the topic and give more instruction to do many different kinds of activity instead. Below is an example of the use of mother tongue to explain the topic:

*Don't worry nya adalah don't worry about what other people talk about, think. Jadi ketika orang-orang itu berbicara sama kamu apapun itu dengarnya kamu jangan khawatir asal apa yang kamu lakukan itu benar. Let it go let it go biarkan (ETT02).*

It can be seen from the teacher's utterance above that mother tongue was used not only to translate the meaning of the instruction that was firstly given in English. Instead, it was inserted to give further explanation that was considered difficult to be delivered in English. The teacher used mother tongue while also relating her explanation to the students' experience as in 'kamu jangan khawatir asal apa yang kamu lakukan itu benar'. By making the explanation as relevant as possible, the students were expected to understand the material better. This is consistent with Perfecto (2020), the use of mother tongue in the learning process plays an important role which can make it more efficient in explaining a material or topic without reducing the target language.

### **The use of mother tongue to give feedback**

Feedback is one of the most crucial aspects to develop students' successful learning experience. Giving constructive feedback can improve engagement, can establish social presence of the teacher and can improve students' academic performance in general (Widhiasih & Maharani, 2016). In foreign language

learning, feedback from the teacher is as important as in any other subject areas such as math or history. However, giving feedback fully in English might create a gap among the students due to their low level of proficiency. Thus, the teacher gave feedback by also using mother tongue. An example of feedback given during the classroom activity can be seen below:

*bersinar good, bersinar is ok, bersinar benar juga (TGF03)*

In the example above, the teacher responded to one of the students who answer a question. At first she said 'good' and then repeated it again by saying 'is ok'. At last, she tried to emphasized the feedback that what her student did was right by saying 'benar juga'. The repetition was intended to make it clear for the student that she had done a good job. In addition, the repetition also shows the teacher attempt to help students understanding the feedback as well as to familiarize them with English, as she repeated the feedback in English twice before switching to Bahasa Indonesia.

### **The use of mother tongue the meaning of new vocabulary**

Teaching the meaning of new vocabulary is one way to improve the target language to students. Instructors who teach new vocabulary to students can gradually achieve learning objectives. In EFL countries, even though there are some policies in educational institutions about the use of English as the medium of instruction in the classroom, in reality teaching new vocabulary actually cannot be separated from the use of the mother tongue. The mother tongue can be a connecting language to the target language. One of the examples of instructors teaching the meaning of new vocabulary during learning can be seen below:

T: *Look like?*  
S: *Terlihat seperti.*

T: *Go?*  
S: *Pergi.*  
T: *See?*  
S: *Melihat. (MNV04)*

In the example above, the teacher asks the students what the word means to which the student answers the meaning of the word. What does the word 'look like' mean? Then students answer 'terlihat seperti'. By asking questions to students, the teacher knows whether the student understands the meaning or not. In the example above, indeed the teacher does not use Indonesian at all, but the students do. This is somewhat different from the example in the discussion of the previous sub-chapter where the teacher himself also uses Indonesian. However, what the teacher did in the example above is also the implementation of using the mother tongue because the teacher consciously and reasonably allowed students to answer in Indonesian. This encourages students to be more active in participating. This is in line with what was stated by Jones & Mutumba (2019) that if the use of mother tongue is applied in the classroom, students' understanding of material improves and they can be more active and independent.

### **The use of mother tongue to give/explain tasks or instructions**

Assignments in learning are very important as it can encourage students' independence and discipline, thus students will be more confident with their abilities. Assignments help students better understand and implement the material being studied. The assignment is one type of assessment which function is to measure the extent to which students are able to achieve learning objectives. In carrying out a task there must be instructions (Sabriani, 2012). The function of instruction is to direct, organize and guide students to be able to carry out tasks well. Therefore, it is very important to make clear instructions. In the context of EFL,

clarity of instruction sometimes needs to be assisted by the use of the mother tongue. The level of proficiency of students who is not too high makes it difficult for them to understand the instructions if they use full English. Therefore, the use of the mother tongue is very necessary. Here are some examples:

*'sekarang now please open your google classroom sekarang silahkan buka google classroom pertemuan terakhir the last meeting ya' (ETI05)*

*'you have to find Indonesian meaning of the words kalian harus mencari arti bahasa Indonesia dari kata-kata yang sudah Miss Afi kasih ya' (ETI06)*

It is explained that the 2 examples above are quite different. The ETI05 example is a technical instruction regarding the support platform. Then the ETI06 example is based on the content and not just on the operation of the tool. Both of them are assisted by the use of their mother tongue so that both the instructions for using the tools and the contents of the assignments are clearly accepted by the students.

## **Conclusion**

According to the findings and discussion, the researcher concludes that this study finds the frequent use of mother tongue in foreign language classes that use 6 language functions. Of the 6 language functions, the use of the mother tongue is very often used with different purposes but still the mother tongue has a role as a

liaison for the target language in order to achieve learning objectives in the classroom. The purpose of this study is how instructors use mother tongue in EFL class, regarding its frequency and function.

The use of mother tongue in the classroom is very often used by instructors to communicate and translate words or sentences from the target language. According to observation data, instructors often use their mother tongue to explain topics or meanings. Furthermore, the instructor in practice first uses the target language and then the mother tongue. Then it can be concluded that the use of mother tongue in foreign language classes by instructors is very often used and helpful, even by students. While still accompanied by the target language.

From the results of the analysis and conclusions, the researchers provide recommendations which are: 1. Mother tongue can help bridge the target language so it is recommended to use it in class, especially for beginner level students so that communication is continuous and students are discouraged, 2. Students are accustomed to interacting using the target language. From these recommendations, although the mother tongue can help, in order to achieve the target language, the use of the mother tongue must be designed in such a way, not only as an incidental strategy. So that the target language is achieved, even though the mother tongue is still used to bridge.

## **Bibliography**

Agustin, D. T., Mujiyanto, J., & Artikel, I. (2015). the Use of Bahasa Indonesia (L1) in the Intensive English (L2) Classroom. *English Education Journal (Program Pascasarjana*

*Universitas Negeri Semarang)*, 5(1), 1–9.

Bawono, K.O., & Rini, J.E., (2010). *The Use of Mother Tongue in General English Program for Teenagers in the Second and Fourth Levels.* (2010). 2001, 46–53

- Birks, M., Chapman, Y., & Francis, K. (2008). Memoing in qualitative research: Probing data and processes. *Journal of Research in Nursing, 13*(1), 68–75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1744987107081254>
- Boon, D. (2011). Adult literacy teaching and learning in multilingual Timor-Leste. *Compare, 41*(2), 261–276. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2011.547287>
- Canagarajah, S. (2011). Translanguaging in the classroom: Emerging issues for research and pedagogy. *Applied Linguistics Review, 2*(2011), 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110239331.1>
- Cochran, W. G., & Chambers, S. P. (1965). The Planning of Observational Studies of Human Populations. *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society. Series A (General), 128*(2), 234. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2344179>
- Dharma, S. (2019). International Journal of Indonesian Education and Teaching. *International Journal of Indonesian Education and Teaching, 3*(1), 128–136.
- Dharma, S. (2019). International Journal of Indonesian Education and Teaching. *International Journal of Indonesian Education and Teaching, 3*(1), 128–136.
- Dr.farida Nugrahani, M. H. (2014). dalam Penelitian Pendidikan Bahasa. 信阳师范学院, *1*(1), 38–42. <http://e-journal.usd.ac.id/index.php/LLT%0Ahttp://jurnal.untan.ac.id/index.php/jpdpb/article/viewFile/11345/10753%0Ahttp://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.04.758%0Awww.iosrjournals.org>
- Eisa, A. (2007). *The Use of Mother Tongue in Group Work. 1*(June), 49–72. <http://marifa.hct.ac.ae/2007/735>
- Faridy, F., & Syaodih, E. (2017). *Analysis on the Importance of Mother Tongue in Early Childhood. 58*(2013), 193–196. <https://doi.org/10.2991/icece-16.2017.33>
- Fitriani, N., & Zulkarnain, S. I. (2019). An Investigation of Mother Tongue Influence on EFL Learners during their Speaking Performance. *SALTeL Journal (Southeast Asia Language Teaching and Learning), 2*(2), 30–35. <https://doi.org/10.35307/saltel.v2i2.29>
- Gay, L.R., Mills, G.E., & Airasian, P. (2009). *Educational research: Competencies for analysis and applications* (9thed.). New Jersey: Pearson.
- Holmes, J., 2013. *Introduction to Sociolinguistics, An.* 4th ed. Milton: Taylor & Francis.
- Jenkins, J. (2015). Repositioning English and multilingualism in English as a Lingua Franca. *Englishes in Practice, 2*(3), 49–85. <https://doi.org/10.1515/eip-2015-0003>
- Jones, S., & Mutumba, S. (2019). Intersections of Mother Tongue-Based Instruction, Funds of Knowledge, Identity, and Social Capital in an Ugandan Pre-School Classroom. *Journal of Language, Identity and Education, 18*(4), 207–221. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2019.1607349>
- Maharani, A. A. P., & Widhiasih, L. K. S. (2016). Respon siswa terhadap umpan balik guru saat pelajaran bahasa inggris di sd saraswati 5 denpasar. *Jurnal Bakti Saraswati (JBS), 5*(2).
- Ma, L. P. F. (2019). Examining the functions of L1 use through teacher and student interactions in an adult migrant English classroom. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, 22*(4), 386–401. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2016.1257562>
- Nelson, Y. K. and C. L. (2006). *World English In Asian Contexts (book)* (Issue c).



- Nuraida, I. (2019). the Influence of the Use the First Language in Indonesian Efl Classrooms. *Journal of English Language Teaching and Literature (JELTL)*, 2(1), 23–30. <https://doi.org/10.47080/jeltl.v2i1.540>
- Paker, T., & Karaağaç, Ö. (2015). The Use and Functions of Mother Tongue in EFL Classes. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 199, 111–119. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.07.494>
- Pardede, P. (2018). Use of Mother Tongue in EFL Classes of Secondary Schools In Jabodebek: Students' and Teachers' Perception. *JET (Journal of English Teaching)*, 4(2), 62. <https://doi.org/10.33541/jet.v4i2.831>
- Pavón Vázquez, V., & Ramos Ordóñez, M. del C. (2019). Describing the use of the L1 in CLIL: an analysis of L1 communication strategies in classroom interaction. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 22(1), 35–48. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2018.1511681>
- Perfecto, M. R. G. (2020). English language teaching and bridging in mother tongue-based multilingual education. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 0(0), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14790718.2020.1716771>
- Pratiwi, W. R. (2018). Interactional language use in EFL classroom: Exploring the phenomena of mother tongue in Indonesia. *Interactional Language Use in EFL Classroom: Exploring the Phenomena of Mother Tongue in Indonesia*, 65(1), 245–249.
- Sabriani, S. (2012). Penerapan Pemberian Tugas Terstruktur disertai Umpan Balik pada Pembelajaran Langsung untuk Meningkatkan Motivasi dan Hasil Belajar Siswa (Studi Pada Materi Pokok Struktur Atom Kelas X6 SMA Negeri Watampone). *Jurnal Chemica*, 13, 39–46.
- Saddhono, K., & Rohmadi, M. (2014). A sociolinguistics study on the use of the Javanese language in the learning process in primary schools in Surakarta, Central Java, Indonesia. *International Education Studies*, 7(6), 25–30. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ies.v7n6p25>
- Said, M. (2017). Effective Behavior of EFL Teachers as Perceived by Undergraduate Students in Indonesia. *English Language Teaching*, 10(10), 50. <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v10n10p50>
- Salehi, M. R., Abiri, E., Hosseini, S. E., & Dorostkar, B. (2013). Design of tunneling field-effect transistor (TFET) with Al xGa1xAS/InxGa1xAs hetero-junction. *2013 21st Iranian Conference on Electrical Engineering, ICEE 2013*, 22, 63–75. <https://doi.org/10.1109/IranianCEE.2013.6599777>
- Seid, Y. (2019). The impact of learning first in mother tongue: evidence from a natural experiment in Ethiopia. *Applied Economics*, 51(6), 577–593. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00036846.2018.1497852>
- Shcrrmo, B. K. (n.d.). *MotherTongue Use in English Classroom*. 80–87.
- Sulistiyo, U. (2016). English language teaching and efl teacher competence in indonesia. *Igniting a Brighter Future of Efl Teaching and Learning in Multilingual Societies*, 4(2), 396–406. <http://ejournal.unp.ac.id/index.php/selt/article/view/7001/5535>
- Syatriana, E., Akib, E., & Sulawesi, S. (2020). *THE POTENTIAL OF LOCAL LANGUAGE AND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION : A CASE STUDY OF*. 7(13), 2439–2444.
- Timuçin, M., & BAYTAR, İ. (2015). the Functions of the Use of L1 : Insights From an Efl Classroom. *Kastamonu Eğitim Dergisi*, 23(1), 241–252.
- Vattøy, K. D., & Gamlem, S. M. (2020). Teacher–student interactions and feedback in English as a foreign

language classrooms. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 50(3), 371–389.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2019.1707512>