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Students' Language Preferences and Attitudes Toward Full English and Code-Mixing Across Proficiency Levels

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Abstract

The choice of instructional language in EFL classrooms remains a key issue, especially in contexts like Indonesia, where students have limited English exposure outside class. Teachers often shift between using full English and code-mixing (English with Bahasa Indonesia). While both approaches offer pedagogical benefits, little is known about how learners at different proficiency levels perceive these practices. This study explores first-year English education students' preferences toward full English and code-mixing at the university level and how these preferences vary by proficiency. The study involved 60 first-year students at the University of Al Ma'soem and used a Likert-scale questionnaire for data collection. Students were grouped into high and low proficiency levels based on TOEFL scores. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze responses. Results showed most students preferred code-mixing over full English. Low-proficiency students found code-mixing helpful for comprehension and anxiety reduction, while high-proficiency students were more open to full English, especially in communicative tasks. However, both groups agreed code-mixing was useful for grammar explanation and instruction delivery. The study concludes that instructional language should align with students' proficiency and task type. A flexible approach, rather than a strict English-only policy, may better support students' learning and emotional needs in EFL classrooms.

Keywords: Language Preference; Code-Mixing; Full English; EFL Classroom, Student Perception, Proficiency Level

INTRODUCTION

The language used in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms remains a central pedagogical concern, particularly in contexts where students have limited exposure to English outside the classroom. Teachers often face the challenge of deciding whether to maintain a full English environment to maximize immersion or to utilize code-mixing, where English is blended with students' first language (L1), typically Bahasa Indonesia. Both approaches have been widely discussed in the literature for their respective benefits and drawbacks (Macaro, 2001; Turnbull et al., 2009). The use of full English in EFL classrooms is based on the principle of maximizing target language exposure. Scholars such as Ellis (2008) and Littlewood (2004) assert that immersive environments foster language fluency and communicative competence, as students are consistently exposed to authentic input and real-life language patterns. Nunan (2003) also emphasizes the role of full English in preparing students for academic and professional settings, aligning with the need for English proficiency in global communication. From a theoretical perspective, Nation (2003) supports the idea of *comprehensible input* (i+1), which encourages learners to process language slightly above their current level.

However, full English instruction also presents challenges. Students with lower proficiency often experience cognitive overload, anxiety, and difficulty grasping complex content (Ford, 2009; Nation, 2003). For this reason, several researchers argue that full English is better suited

for intermediate or advanced learners, while beginners benefit from some L1 support (Macaro, 2001; Cummins, 2014). In certain educational contexts, such as rural schools with limited resources, the implementation of full English can be even more problematic (Temesgen & Hailu, 2022). Thus, the effectiveness of this approach depends heavily on the teacher's ability to scaffold instruction through simplified language and visual aids. In contrast, code-mixing is often employed as a pragmatic response to classroom realities. Defined as the blending of two or more languages in one utterance (Muysken, 2000), code-mixing allows teachers to clarify meaning, give grammar explanations, and maintain instructional flow (Darwis, 2023). In Indonesia, where English is taught as a foreign language, studies show that code-mixing is a common and culturally accepted practice (Fitria, 2022; Novianti & Said, 2021). Macaro (2001) and Rahmayanti et al. (2024) highlight its role in reducing student anxiety, building rapport, and providing emotional comfort particularly for beginners. Pedagogically, code-mixing enables teachers to address students' immediate comprehension needs without halting the lesson. Temesgen & Hailu (2022) note that it supports meaning-making and concept clarification, while Macaro (2001) underscores its role in scaffolding beginner learners. Nonetheless, overreliance on the L1 may reduce students' exposure to English and limit their opportunities for language acquisition (Turnbull et al., 2009; Littlewood, 2004). Code-mixing must therefore be applied strategically and in accordance with students' language development goals. The issue of language use in the EFL classroom is further complicated by students' affective factors, such as anxiety, confidence, and motivation. Krashen (1985)Affective Filter Hypothesis posits that learners acquire language more effectively when they feel secure, motivated, and relaxed. Thus, language choice should not only consider cognitive development but also emotional readiness. For instance, full English may increase anxiety among low-proficiency students Ford (2009), while high-proficiency learners may perceive it as motivating and intellectually stimulating (Littlewood, 2004). Meanwhile, code-mixing can reduce stress, foster confidence, and enhance participation for those still building basic language skills.

In terms of teacher language choice, several factors influence classroom language decisions, including institutional policies, teaching philosophies, and perceived student needs. Some institutions enforce an English-only policy to promote immersion, while others allow flexible use of code-mixing. Macaro (2001) and Hidayati (2012) reveal that many teachers adopt a balanced and responsive approach, using L1 support when necessary for clarity or cultural explanation. However, excessive use of the L1 can diminish exposure to the target language, compromising the immersive environment that facilitates incidental learning (Ellis, 2008). Consequently, teachers must exercise pedagogical judgment, balancing exposure with accessibility. Recent studies have begun to explore students' language preferences, particularly as they relate to proficiency levels. Raschka et al. (2009), for example, found that higher-proficiency Taiwanese students preferred full English instruction due to its perceived cognitive challenge and potential for language growth. In contrast, lower-proficiency learners favored bilingual approaches that provided clarity and emotional support. In Indonesia, Yulia (2013) found that students with limited vocabulary preferred bilingual instruction to avoid confusion and disengagement. Similarly, Kustati (2014) observed that students' preferences fluctuated depending on the task type and complexity, with a general trend toward L1 use for grammar explanation and English use for discussion and practice.

Despite this growing body of literature, relatively few studies have directly examined how students emotionally respond to instructional language practices, particularly across different proficiency levels. Most research has focused on teacher strategies, language acquisition outcomes, or policy implementation, leaving a gap in understanding students' personal experiences and preferences. Affective variables such as anxiety, comfort, and motivation remain underexplored, even though they play a crucial role in shaping students' engagement

and achievement in language learning. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by investigating students' language preferences and affective attitudes toward the use of full English and code-mixing in EFL classrooms. The focus is on identifying not only which approach students prefer, but also how their emotional responses differ based on proficiency level. Specifically, this research addresses three key objectives: (1) to identify the general instructional language preferred by students; (2) to compare language preferences and emotional attitudes between high- and low-proficiency learners; and (3) to explore how students perceive the use of full English and code-mixing across various classroom activities, including instruction, grammar explanation, teacher feedback, group discussions, and presentations. By addressing these objectives, the study seeks to inform more adaptive, learner-centered teaching practices that accommodate students' linguistic and emotional needs. The goal is to support EFL teachers in making informed decisions about classroom language use, ones that optimize both language exposure and learner well-being.

METHOD

This study employed a quantitative descriptive research design, as it aims to systematically measure and describe students' language preferences and affective responses toward full English and code-mixing in EFL classrooms. According to Creswell (2012), descriptive research is appropriate when the objective is to provide a snapshot of current conditions or opinions within a specific population. To achieve this, the researcher distributed a structured Likert-scale questionnaire to capture student choices and emotional reactions (e.g., comfort, anxiety, motivation) across various classroom activities, including instruction, grammar explanation, teacher feedback, and presentations. Although the study did not incorporate open-ended items or interviews, this design enables a focused examination of patterns across proficiency levels and lays the groundwork for mixed-method approaches in future research. The participants comprised 60 first-year students from the English Education Department at University of Al Ma'soem. Based on institutional TOEFL scores, students were divided into two groups: high proficiency (TOEFL $\geq$ 450) and low proficiency (TOEFL $<$ 450), following benchmarks commonly used in Indonesian tertiary education (Yulia, 2013). Data were analyzed using Microsoft Excel, applying descriptive statistics, primarily frequency and percentage distributions to reveal patterns in student responses. While inferential statistical analysis was not conducted due to sample size limitations, this approach is sufficient for identifying emerging trends and informing future studies with larger samples and more complex statistical testing (Fraenkel et al., 2011).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This section presents and interprets the findings based on quantitative data collected through structured questionnaires. The results are organized to address the three main objectives of the study: (1) to identify students' overall instructional language preferences; (2) to compare language preferences and affective attitudes between high- and low-proficiency learners; and (3) to examine how students respond to the use of full English and code-mixing across different classroom activities. The findings are displayed in three tables, each highlighting patterns in preference and emotional response, such as comfort, anxiety, and motivation. The discussion accompanying each table does not only describe the numerical trends but also relates them to students' proficiency levels and the pedagogical implications for EFL teaching. By analyzing how learners with different language abilities perceive instructional language, this study aims

to provide insights into how language choice can be adapted to better support student engagement and comprehension in English language classrooms.

Table 1. Overall Preference for Language of Instruction

Language of Instruction	Number of Students	Percentage
Full English	23	38%
Code-Mixing (English + ndonesian)	37	62%
Total	60	100%

The data in Table 1 shows that a majority of students (62%) prefer code-mixing as the medium of instruction, while only 38% favor full English. This preference indicates that, for most students in the sampled EFL classrooms, the use of both English and Bahasa Indonesia creates a more comfortable and accessible learning environment. This finding aligns with previous studies (e.g., Macaro, 2001; Krashen, 1985) which suggest that code-mixing can function as a scaffolding strategy that lowers anxiety and enhances comprehension, particularly in contexts where students may have limited exposure to English outside the classroom. The data also supports the view that code-mixing helps bridge the gap between learners' existing linguistic resources and the target language input. However, the fact that a notable portion (38%) of students still prefer full English suggests a growing awareness or aspiration among learners toward language immersion and communicative competence. This minority may include higher-proficiency students who perceive full English as more beneficial for fluency development and as preparation for real-world English use.

Critically, the dominance of code-mixing preference does not imply pedagogical deficiency; rather, it reflects the learners' current affective and cognitive readiness. It signals the need for adaptive language policies in teaching—ones that gradually guide learners toward higher exposure to English, without sacrificing clarity and emotional safety in the process. The relatively high preference for code-mixing also illustrates the practical limitations of enforcing rigid English-only policies, especially in diverse proficiency settings like vocational schools. This overall result forms the foundation for further analysis in Tables 2 and 3, where preferences are broken down by proficiency level and specific classroom activities, helping to uncover more nuanced patterns in students' language attitudes.

Table 2. Language Preferences Across Proficiency Levels

Statement	High Proficiency (Agree%)	Low Proficiency (Agree%)
I prefer my teacher to use full English in class.	60%	37%
I prefer my teacher to mix English and Bahasa Indonesia.	80%	87%
I feel anxious when the teacher speaks only in English.	20%	40%
I feel more confident when the teacher uses code-mixing.	80%	87%
I understand the material better when both languages are used.	93%	97%
I want to improve my English through full-English instruction.	93%	87%

This table offers a deeper look at how students' attitudes toward language use differ across proficiency levels, highlighting the interplay between preference, anxiety, confidence, and perceived comprehension. Students with high proficiency express greater acceptance of full English instruction (60%), compared to only 37% of low-proficiency students. This supports the idea that students with stronger language skills are more open to immersion-based environments, which they likely perceive as opportunities for further growth and fluency. Conversely, lower-proficiency students show a marked reliance on code-mixing, with 87% indicating they prefer the teacher to mix English and Bahasa Indonesia. The affective dimension becomes especially clear in the statements related to anxiety and confidence. Twice as many low-proficiency students (40%) feel anxious with full English compared to high-proficiency students (20%). Simultaneously, both groups report high levels of confidence when code-mixing is used 87% for low proficiency and 80% for high. This suggests that code-mixing provides an emotional buffer even for students who are more linguistically advanced, reinforcing Krashen's (1985) concept of the *Affective Filter*.

Notably, both groups strongly agree that they understand lessons better when both languages are used (93% for high, 97% for low), emphasizing that clarity and comprehension often take precedence over idealistic immersion goals. This practical concern underscores the pedagogical importance of language support mechanisms, especially when handling abstract or unfamiliar content. Interestingly, both groups also express a high desire to improve their English through full-English instruction (93% high, 87% low). This may indicate that while students appreciate the comfort of code-mixing, they still value full English as an aspirational or long-term goal. This duality shows that students don't reject full English outright, they simply seek a *balanced transition* that supports their current capabilities. In sum, this table reveals a nuanced picture: preference is not merely about liking one language mode over the other, but also about how that choice interacts with students' emotional well-being, confidence, and learning goals. For teachers, these insights call for a differentiated approach where instructional language can be adjusted dynamically based on learners' proficiency, task difficulty, and emotional responses.

Table 3. Student Preferences for Teacher's Language Use in Classroom Activities

Classroom Activity	High Proficiency Level [30]		Low Proficiency Level [30]	
	Full English (%)	Code-Mixing (%)	Full English (%)	Code-Mixing (%)
Instruction	60%	40%	27%	73%
Grammar Explanation	40%	60%	23%	77%
Teacher Feedback	57%	43%	37%	63%
Group Discussion	33%	67%	27%	73%
Presentation	37%	63%	27%	73%

This table disaggregates language preferences according to specific classroom activities, offering insight into how task type influences students' instructional language choices, particularly across proficiency levels. The clearest trend is that code-mixing is strongly preferred by low-proficiency students in nearly all classroom activities, with the highest percentages observed in grammar explanation (77%) and instruction (73%). This highlights that these learners feel they require additional linguistic scaffolding to understand complex content or teacher directions. These results are consistent with studies by Macaro (2001) and Nation (2003), which suggest that the L1 can be a vital support tool in cognitively demanding tasks for novice learners. In contrast, high-proficiency students show a higher tolerance for full English, especially in instruction (60%) and teacher feedback (57%). These are teacher-centered

activities where students are generally expected to process information rather than produce it, suggesting that receptive skills are more developed among these learners, making full English input more acceptable.

Interestingly, in more interactive or student-led tasks, like group discussion and presentations, even high-proficiency students tend to favor code-mixing (67% and 63%, respectively). This contradicts the assumption that high achievers always prefer immersion; instead, it implies that the pressure to perform or speak may increase cognitive and emotional demands, prompting a fallback to code-mixing for clarity or confidence. These findings resonate with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, which posits that language performance can be inhibited by anxiety or fear of making mistakes, even among advanced learners. Another point worth noting is that grammar explanation is one of the activities with the lowest preference for full English across both groups (40% high, 23% low). This aligns with the complexity and abstraction often involved in grammar instruction, where students benefit from first-language clarification. In essence, this table demonstrates that language preference is not static or uniform, but highly sensitive to context. While full English is more accepted in passive, input-heavy activities, code-mixing dominates in output-driven or cognitively demanding tasks, especially among less proficient learners. This finding reinforces the pedagogical principle that flexibility and contextual adaptation are crucial in EFL classroom language policy.

Discussion

The findings of this study reinforce the argument that language proficiency significantly shapes learners' preferences regarding the language of instruction in EFL classrooms. High-proficiency students showed a stronger inclination toward full English instruction, citing reasons such as exposure, fluency development, and immersion. This supports Ellis's (2008) emphasis on the importance of comprehensible input and the role of immersive environments in fostering natural language acquisition. Similarly, Littlewood (2004) asserts that students benefit from consistent use of the target language to develop both receptive and productive skills, especially at more advanced levels. On the other hand, low-proficiency students overwhelmingly preferred code-mixing, citing comprehension, emotional comfort, and confidence as key reasons. This aligns with Krashen's (1985) Affective Filter Hypothesis, which posits that emotional factors such as anxiety and low self-confidence can block language acquisition. Code-mixing appears to act as a form of scaffolding that lowers the affective filter, allowing students to better engage with content and instruction. These results are consistent with Handrayani (2022), who found that EFL teachers in Indonesia employ code-mixing adaptively to meet students' linguistic needs and reduce cognitive overload. Similarly, Erdem (2024), in a Turkish EFL context, confirmed that students' attitudes toward code-switching were significantly influenced by their English proficiency, while other variables like age or gender were not substantial predictors.

This study also found that students' language preferences varied depending on classroom activity. In teacher-centered activities such as giving instructions and explaining grammar, students especially those with lower proficiency strongly favored code-mixing, particularly when topics were complex or abstract. However, for more student-centered or performative tasks such as presentations and group discussions, full English was more tolerated and even preferred by higher-proficiency students. These findings echo those of Helmie et al. (2020), who noted that code-mixing was commonly used in college student presentations to enhance clarity and audience engagement. Moreover, Fadliyah et al.(2023) demonstrated that even advanced EFL students engaged in code-mixing during presentations, using it as a pragmatic communication strategy when facing linguistic difficulty or performance pressure.

Interestingly, while full English was seen as more *ideal* by advanced students, even they acknowledged the practical usefulness of code-mixing in certain contexts, particularly for

checking understanding or clarifying instructions. This aligns with Macaro's (2001) notion of the *optimal use of the first language*, where both L1 and L2 are used judiciously to support language development without reducing target language exposure unnecessarily. In summary, the study's findings confirm that a rigid, one-size-fits-all approach to classroom language use is neither effective nor equitable. Instead, teachers should be flexible and responsive, using full English where it enhances learning and code-mixing when it aids understanding and emotional engagement. Recent studies in both Indonesian and international EFL contexts confirm that strategic and learner-sensitive language use remains a central component of effective classroom instruction. The goal should not be to eliminate the first language entirely, but to guide learners gradually toward greater comfort and competence in using English independently.

CONCLUSION

This study explored students' language preferences in English language classrooms across different proficiency levels, focusing on the use of full English versus code-mixing. The results revealed a clear divergence in preference: high-proficiency students tended to favor full English, while low-proficiency students overwhelmingly preferred code-mixing. This indicates that language proficiency significantly influences learners' comfort and perceived effectiveness of the instructional language used by teachers. Furthermore, students' preferences varied depending on classroom activity. For cognitively demanding tasks such as grammar explanation and instructions, most students, regardless of proficiency, preferred code-mixing. However, in activities such as presentations and group discussions, full English was more acceptable, particularly among high-proficiency learners.

The findings suggest that a one-size-fits-all approach in language use may not meet the diverse needs of learners. Instead, a dynamic and responsive language policy, one that allows for strategic code-mixing while scaffolding toward full English can foster both comprehension and language development. Teachers should consider students' proficiency levels and the classroom context when making language choices. Importantly, teacher awareness and deliberate planning in language use can support both inclusivity and the goals of English language acquisition. Future research is encouraged to explore longitudinal effects of these preferences on students' actual language outcomes and to examine teacher perspectives on balancing English and L1 use. Incorporating qualitative classroom observations may also offer a richer understanding of how language preferences manifest in real teaching practices.

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