

Strategic First-Language Use in Adult ESOL: Learners' Perceptions in UK Further Education

Kamran Amin

King Abdullah University of Science and Technology, (KAUST). This study is based on research conducted as part of the author's postgraduate studies at the University of Derby, United Kingdom.

Email: Kamranamintefl@gmail.com

doi: <https://doi.org/10.37745/ijeld.2013/vol14n41349>

Published August 10, 2026

Citation: Amin K. (2026) Strategic First-Language Use in Adult ESOL: Learners' Perceptions in UK Further Education, *International Journal of Education, Learning and Development*, 14 (4),13-49

Abstract: *The role of learners' first language (L1) in English language teaching remains widely debated, particularly within multilingual adult ESOL classrooms. While previous research has focused largely on teachers' beliefs and classroom practices, comparatively little attention has been given to adult learners' perspectives. This study explored adult ESOL learners' perceptions of strategic first-language use in a UK Further Education college. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight adult ESOL learners and analysed using thematic analysis. The findings showed that participants viewed strategic L1 use as a valuable pedagogical resource that supported comprehension, language learning and classroom participation when used purposefully. Learners also demonstrated agency by making informed judgements about when and how L1 should be used and perceived its role as developmental, with reliance decreasing as English proficiency increased. The findings support flexible, context-sensitive multilingual pedagogy and have implications for ESOL teaching, teacher education and institutional language policy.*

Keywords: Strategic first-language use, adult ESOL, learner agency, multilingual pedagogy, UK further education, thematic analysis

INTRODUCTION

In multilingual English classrooms, few pedagogical decisions are as consequential—or as persistently debated—as whether learners' first language (L1) should be used to support English language learning. Although this issue has attracted sustained attention for several decades, teachers continue to make complex instructional decisions regarding whether, when and how learners' first language should be incorporated into classroom practice. Traditionally, English-only approaches argued that maximum exposure to the target language provided the most favourable conditions for language acquisition. More recent scholarship, however, recognises that learners' existing linguistic knowledge can serve as a valuable pedagogical resource when its use is carefully planned and pedagogically appropriate (Atkinson, 1987; Cook, 2001; Macaro, 2009; Hall & Cook, 2012). Consequently, the discussion has gradually shifted from asking whether L1 should be used to examining how the purposeful use of learners' first language can most effectively support English language learning while maintaining meaningful opportunities for communication in English (Kim & Choi, 2024).

This changing perspective reflects broader developments in English language teaching. Earlier methodological traditions generally discouraged learners' first language, assuming that exclusive use of English maximised opportunities for target-language exposure (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Contemporary research presents a more nuanced view, suggesting that judicious L1 use can facilitate comprehension, clarify complex grammatical concepts, support vocabulary development and reduce learner anxiety without diminishing the central role of English in classroom interaction (Cook, 2001; Cummins, 2007; Hall & Cook, 2012). Recent empirical studies likewise indicate that learners generally favour selective rather than unrestricted L1 use, particularly when it assists the understanding of difficult language, supports classroom participation or enables teachers to explain complex concepts efficiently (Hawa et al., 2021; Kim & Choi, 2024; Rahmany et al., 2025). Nevertheless, researchers continue to caution that excessive reliance on L1 may reduce opportunities for meaningful interaction in English and should therefore be guided by clear pedagogical objectives rather than habitual classroom practice (Macaro, 2009; Molway et al., 2022). Collectively, this body of evidence suggests that the educational value of L1 depends not simply on whether it is used, but on when, why and for what pedagogical purpose it is employed.

Despite these developments, comparatively little is known about how adult ESOL learners in UK Further Education (FE) evaluate the pedagogical appropriateness of strategic first-language use across different classroom situations. Most existing research has been conducted predominantly in school, university and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, with comparatively fewer studies focusing on adult learners studying English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) in UK Further Education. Moreover, previous research has largely examined whether learners view L1 positively or negatively, whereas less attention has been devoted to understanding how adult ESOL learners distinguish between pedagogically appropriate and inappropriate uses of L1 and the specific classroom purposes that make its use effective. Given the linguistic diversity, educational backgrounds and varied learning experiences characteristic of adult ESOL programmes, learners' perspectives provide an important source of evidence for informing classroom language practices and teacher decision-making. Understanding how learners themselves evaluate purposeful L1 use may therefore contribute to more informed and context-sensitive pedagogical decisions.

To address this gap, the present study explores adult ESOL learners' perceptions of strategic first-language use within a UK Further Education college. Using a qualitative case study design, the research investigates learners' attitudes towards L1 use by teachers and classmates, examines how purposeful first-language use influences their learning experiences, and explores the pedagogical functions that learners associate with L1 during English language learning. Rather than treating first-language use as either inherently beneficial or detrimental, the study adopts a learner-centred perspective to understand the conditions under which L1 can most effectively complement English-medium instruction.

By foregrounding the voices of adult ESOL learners, this study contributes to current discussions of multilingual pedagogy in several important respects. First, it demonstrates that adult ESOL learners perceive strategic first-language use as a valuable pedagogical resource whose effectiveness depends upon purposeful and context-sensitive implementation. Second, the findings show that learners exercise pedagogical agency by making informed judgements concerning when, why and by whom first-language use is appropriate. Third, the study highlights the developmental nature of strategic first-

language use, suggesting that learners view first-language support as a temporary scaffold whose role should evolve alongside increasing English proficiency. Finally, by providing evidence from an adult ESOL Further Education context in the United Kingdom, the study contributes qualitative evidence from an educational setting that remains comparatively underrepresented within the existing literature. Collectively, these contributions offer practical insights for ESOL teachers, teacher educators and curriculum developers seeking to implement multilingual pedagogies that are principled, flexible and responsive to learners' educational needs.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

Theoretical Perspectives on Strategic First-Language Use

The pedagogical role of learners' first language (L1) has long occupied a central position in debates surrounding English language teaching (ELT). Questions concerning whether learners' L1 should be incorporated into classroom instruction have been discussed across successive language teaching methodologies, reflecting broader assumptions about the nature of second language acquisition and the most effective conditions for learning. While opinions have differed regarding the extent to which L1 should be used, the debate has consistently centred on balancing opportunities for target-language exposure with learners' need for linguistic support. As a result, classroom language choice has become one of the most influential pedagogical decisions facing English language teachers.

The discussion of strategic first-language use is informed by multilingual and sociocultural perspectives on language learning, which recognise learners' existing linguistic knowledge as a cognitive and pedagogical resource rather than simply a source of interference. From this perspective, learners' first language can mediate understanding, scaffold learning and support second-language development when employed purposefully and in response to learners' educational needs (Cummins, 2007; Hall & Cook, 2012). Rather than viewing L1 and English as competing systems, these perspectives emphasise their complementary roles in supporting language learning within multilingual classrooms.

For much of the twentieth century, dominant language teaching methodologies promoted English-only instruction as the preferred classroom approach. Influenced by methods such as the Direct Method and later Communicative Language Teaching, exclusive use of the target language was widely considered essential for maximising learners' exposure to English and encouraging authentic communication (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Within this perspective, learners' first language was frequently viewed as a source of interference that limited opportunities for second-language development. Consequently, many teachers were encouraged to minimise or avoid L1 use wherever possible, despite continuing practical challenges associated with explaining complex language, managing classrooms and supporting lower-proficiency learners.

Subsequent research challenged the assumption that effective language learning necessarily requires the complete exclusion of learners' first language. Atkinson (1987) was among the first to argue that limited and principled L1 use could support classroom learning when employed appropriately. This position was further developed by Cook (2001), who questioned the monolingual assumption

underlying many English-only approaches and proposed that learners' existing linguistic knowledge should be viewed as a resource rather than an obstacle to language learning. Building on these arguments, Cummins (2007) emphasised the cognitive value of bilingual learners' linguistic repertoires, while Macaro (2009) argued that decisions regarding L1 use should be guided by pedagogical purpose rather than ideological preference. Hall and Cook (2012) subsequently synthesised evidence from a wide range of studies, concluding that carefully managed L1 use can facilitate comprehension, vocabulary learning, grammar explanation and classroom interaction when aligned with clearly defined learning objectives.

Recent research has continued to develop this more balanced perspective. Rather than framing L1 use as either inherently beneficial or detrimental, contemporary studies increasingly emphasise that its educational value depends on contextual factors including learner proficiency, lesson objectives, task demands and teachers' pedagogical intentions. Studies published in recent years similarly report that learners generally favour selective and purposeful L1 use, particularly when it supports understanding of difficult language or facilitates classroom participation, while expressing less support for excessive or unnecessary reliance on the first language (Hawa et al., 2021; Molway et al., 2022; Kim & Choi, 2024; Rahmany et al., 2025). Collectively, these studies suggest that classroom language choice is most appropriately understood as a context-sensitive pedagogical decision rather than adherence to a single instructional principle.

Taken together, the literature demonstrates a clear shift in emphasis over the past two decades. The central question is no longer whether learners' first language should be permitted in English language classrooms, but under what circumstances its use is pedagogically appropriate and how it can best support English language learning without reducing meaningful opportunities for communication in English. This emerging understanding provides the theoretical foundation for the present study and highlights the importance of examining strategic first-language use from the perspective of learners themselves. Understanding how adult ESOL learners evaluate purposeful L1 use therefore represents a logical next step in extending current knowledge and provides the foundation for the following section on learners' perceptions of strategic first-language use.

Learners' Perceptions of Strategic First-Language Use

Learners' perceptions are central to understanding the pedagogical role of strategic first-language use because learners directly experience the effects of classroom language decisions. Although teachers determine when and how L1 is permitted or employed, learners evaluate whether such use facilitates comprehension, supports participation or unnecessarily limits opportunities to communicate in English. Their perspectives therefore provide valuable evidence not only about attitudes towards first-language use but also about the conditions under which strategic L1 use is perceived as pedagogically appropriate.

Earlier learner-focused studies generally reported positive attitudes towards limited L1 use. Across a range of linguistic and educational contexts, learners frequently regarded their first language as helpful for understanding difficult content, clarifying grammar and vocabulary, and reducing uncertainty during English language learning. Schweers (1999) reported strong support for Spanish use among learners in Puerto Rico, while Tang (2002) found similarly favourable attitudes towards Chinese in

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK

English classes. Studies involving Korean, Croatian and Arabic-speaking learners likewise indicated that students often viewed L1 as a resource that could support target-language development rather than simply interfere with it (Kim & Petraki, 2009; Al Shammari, 2011; Kovačić & Kirinić, 2011). Collectively, these studies identified a broad pattern of learner support, although this support was rarely presented as an endorsement of unrestricted first-language use.

More detailed findings suggest that learners' attitudes are closely connected to pedagogical purpose. Storch and Wigglesworth (2003), for example, found that learners associated L1 with understanding word meanings and grammatical points, including among some students who did not regularly use their first language themselves. Kim and Petraki (2009) similarly reported that learners regarded L1 as an important resource for English language learning. Such findings indicate that positive attitudes reflect the pedagogical functions that L1 performs rather than a general preference for increased first-language communication. Learners appear particularly receptive when L1 resolves a specific learning difficulty efficiently but are less supportive when it becomes unnecessary or replaces opportunities to practise English.

Learner proficiency also appears to shape attitudes towards first-language use. Prodromou (2002) found that beginner and intermediate learners were generally more accepting of L1 use by teachers and classmates, whereas advanced learners preferred greater use of English. Huang (2006) reported a similarly balanced position, with learners valuing teachers' use of L1 for grammar clarification while nevertheless wishing English to remain the principal classroom language. Likewise, Nazary's (2008) Iranian participants expressed greater reservations about L1 use because they believed that excessive reliance could reduce exposure to English. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that learner perceptions cannot be characterised as uniformly positive or negative; rather, they reflect informed judgements about balancing immediate learning support with longer-term target-language development.

Recent empirical research has reinforced this more nuanced interpretation. Korean university learners valued L1 particularly for explaining complex grammar and vocabulary but considered it less necessary during assessment and interactive activities. They also preferred teacher-directed L1 use over unrestricted learner use, suggesting that perceived pedagogical value depends partly on who employs the first language and for what purpose (Kim & Choi, 2024). Similarly, Afghan university learners reported that L1 supported understanding, reduced anxiety and contributed to a more supportive learning environment, particularly at lower levels of English proficiency, while simultaneously recognising that excessive reliance could hinder English development (Rahmany et al., 2025). Evidence from adult non-formal language education further indicates that learners evaluate L1 according to the specific pedagogical functions it performs and often align with teachers when its use is purposeful, transparent and responsive to learning needs (Criado & González-Romero, 2023).

Taken together, existing research demonstrates that learners generally favour selective and pedagogically purposeful L1 use rather than unrestricted first-language communication. Their preferences vary according to proficiency, classroom activity, instructional purpose, the amount of L1 used and whether it is employed by teachers or classmates. Nevertheless, much of this evidence has emerged from school, university or EFL settings. Comparatively less is known about how adult ESOL learners in UK Further Education evaluate different classroom uses of strategic first-language use and

distinguish between helpful, unnecessary and excessive L1 use. Examining these judgements is essential to understanding learner perspectives as more than simple expressions of approval or disapproval and provides a direct rationale for the present study.

Pedagogical Functions of Strategic First-Language Use

The educational value of learners' first language (L1) extends beyond the question of whether it should be used in English language classrooms. Increasingly, research suggests that its contribution depends on the pedagogical functions it performs during language learning rather than on the amount of L1 used. Rather than viewing L1 as either inherently beneficial or detrimental, contemporary scholarship recognises that it can serve a range of cognitive, instructional, affective and social functions when employed purposefully and in response to learners' needs (Cook, 2001; Macaro, 2009; Hall & Cook, 2012). Consequently, evaluating L1 solely according to the quantity used provides an incomplete understanding of its educational role; greater attention should instead be given to how, when and why it is used within particular teaching and learning contexts.

This discussion is further informed by sociocultural perspectives on language learning, which conceptualise learners' existing linguistic resources as cognitive tools that mediate understanding, scaffold learning and support second-language development (Vygotsky, 1978; Lantolf, 2000; Cummins, 2007). From this perspective, strategic first-language use is viewed not as an alternative to English-medium instruction but as a pedagogical resource whose educational value depends upon how effectively it supports learners' engagement with increasingly complex language tasks.

One of the most consistently reported functions of L1 is its contribution to the cognitive aspects of language learning. Across a range of educational settings, research has shown that learners use their first language to facilitate comprehension, clarify grammatical structures, develop vocabulary knowledge and negotiate meaning during learning tasks (Atkinson, 1987; Cook, 2001; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003). L1 has also been described as a cognitive tool that enables learners to process complex concepts, make connections between existing and new knowledge, and scaffold second-language development (Cummins, 2007; Hall & Cook, 2012). Rather than replacing English, carefully managed first-language use may reduce unnecessary cognitive load and allow learners to engage more effectively with challenging linguistic content. Recent research continues to support these functions, with learners reporting that L1 is particularly valuable when explaining difficult grammar, unfamiliar vocabulary and abstract concepts (Hawa et al., 2021; Kim & Choi, 2024; Rahmany et al., 2025). Collectively, these studies suggest that strategic first-language use functions as a facilitator of learning by supporting both meaning-focused and form-focused language activities.

Beyond supporting learning processes, L1 also performs important instructional functions that assist teachers in managing classroom interaction. Studies have shown that teachers may employ learners' first language to explain complex tasks, provide classroom instructions, clarify expectations and ensure that learners understand key concepts before progressing to communicative activities (Atkinson, 1987; Macaro, 2009; Hall & Cook, 2012). Such use is generally viewed as a means of increasing instructional efficiency rather than replacing English-medium teaching. More recent research similarly suggests that learners value teacher-directed L1 use when it facilitates understanding and enables lessons to progress more efficiently, although they remain less supportive of unnecessary or excessive use (Kim & Choi,

2024; Molway et al., 2022). Collectively, these findings indicate that classroom language choice should be guided by instructional purpose rather than adherence to rigid methodological principles.

The literature further highlights the affective and social functions of first-language use. Limited and purposeful L1 use has been associated with reduced learner anxiety, increased confidence and greater willingness to participate, particularly among learners with lower levels of English proficiency (Brooks-Lewis, 2009; Storch & Aldosari, 2010). L1 may also facilitate collaboration by enabling learners to negotiate meaning, exchange ideas and maintain interaction while completing classroom activities (Anton & DiCamilla, 1999; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003). Recent learner-based studies continue to report that learners value first-language use when it creates a more supportive learning environment without diminishing opportunities to communicate in English (Kim & Choi, 2024; Rahmany et al., 2025). These findings suggest that L1 contributes not only to linguistic development but also to learner engagement, confidence and classroom participation, provided that English remains the principal medium of communication.

Collectively, the literature demonstrates that the pedagogical value of learners' first language lies not in the language itself but in the educational functions it performs. Cognitive support, instructional clarification, affective reassurance and social interaction represent complementary rather than competing roles, illustrating that L1 can contribute to language learning in multiple ways when used purposefully and judiciously (Hall & Cook, 2012; Kim & Choi, 2024). At the same time, existing research consistently indicates that no single function justifies unrestricted first-language use; rather, its effectiveness depends upon the instructional purpose, timing, amount and context in which it is employed (Macaro, 2009; Molway et al., 2022). While these pedagogical functions are increasingly recognised across diverse educational settings, comparatively little research has examined how adult ESOL learners in UK Further Education understand and evaluate these functions from their own learning experiences. Addressing this issue provides an important conceptual bridge to the contextual focus of the following section.

Strategic First-Language Use in Adult ESOL and UK Further Education

While research has increasingly recognised the pedagogical value of purposeful first-language (L1) use, much of the existing evidence has been generated within school, university and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings (Cook, 2001; Macaro, 2009; Hall & Cook, 2012; Kim & Choi, 2024). Comparatively less attention has been devoted to adult learners studying English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), particularly within UK Further Education (FE). Although findings from EFL contexts have substantially advanced understanding of classroom language use, they cannot be assumed to apply directly to adult ESOL learners whose educational goals, linguistic experiences and learning environments differ considerably (Baynham, 2006; Baynham & Simpson, 2010). Recent research on language education for adult migrants similarly argues that multilingual adult learners represent a distinct educational population whose linguistic diversity, migration experiences and social circumstances require context-sensitive pedagogical approaches rather than assumptions derived from traditional EFL settings.

Unlike learners typically represented in much of the EFL literature, adult ESOL learners constitute a highly diverse population whose educational experiences differ fundamentally from those of learners

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK

studying English in more traditional foreign-language contexts. Many bring extensive life experience, multilingual repertoires, varied educational histories and differing levels of literacy to the classroom (Baynham, 2006; Norton, 2013). Their motivations for learning English frequently extend beyond academic achievement to include employment, vocational training, further education, healthcare, civic participation and everyday communication. Unlike learners studying English as a foreign language within their home countries, ESOL learners are developing English while living in an English-speaking society, where opportunities and demands for authentic language use exist both inside and outside the classroom. Contemporary research increasingly recognises that language learning for adult migrants is closely connected to issues of participation, identity, multilingualism and social inclusion rather than language proficiency alone.

The UK Further Education sector provides a particularly distinctive environment for examining these issues. ESOL programmes in Further Education colleges typically serve learners from a wide range of linguistic, cultural and educational backgrounds, including refugees, asylum seekers, recent migrants and long-term residents (Baynham & Simpson, 2010). Learners often enter programmes with differing levels of prior education, literacy and English proficiency, creating multilingual classrooms in which several first languages may be represented simultaneously. Recent scholarship argues that ESOL provision in England continues to operate within a fragmented policy landscape and that multilingual adult learners require educational approaches that recognise linguistic diversity, learner voice and meaningful participation within society. Consistent with this wider picture, the participants in the present study represented multiple linguistic and cultural backgrounds, including learners from Yemen, Iraq, Sudan, Somalia, Syria, Romania, Poland, Lithuania, Croatia, Italy and Spain, illustrating the heterogeneous nature of ESOL provision within UK Further Education.

These contextual characteristics have important implications for pedagogical decision-making regarding classroom language use. In multilingual ESOL classrooms, teachers cannot always rely on sharing a common first language with learners, nor can they assume that learners themselves share the same linguistic background (Cummins, 2007; Hall & Cook, 2012). Decisions regarding strategic first-language use are therefore likely to differ from those reported in more linguistically homogeneous EFL settings. Adult ESOL learners regularly encounter authentic communicative demands beyond the classroom while simultaneously requiring targeted linguistic support during instruction. Moreover, recent research highlights that many adult ESOL learners, particularly refugees and forced migrants, may experience educational disruption, trauma and complex settlement challenges, all of which influence language learning and classroom participation. These realities reinforce the need for flexible, learner-centred pedagogical approaches that are responsive to multilingual adult classrooms.

The importance of this context is further reflected in current UK ESOL policy and research. Recent national reviews argue that existing ESOL qualifications, curriculum frameworks and teaching methodologies require updating to reflect the realities of contemporary multilingual classrooms and to better support learners' progression into employment, further education and wider participation in society. These developments demonstrate that adult ESOL is no longer viewed solely as language instruction but increasingly as a key component of educational inclusion, economic participation and social integration. Consequently, understanding how learners themselves evaluate the pedagogical role of strategic first-language use has become increasingly important for informing evidence-based classroom practice.

Overall, the literature indicates that adult ESOL learners in UK Further Education occupy a distinctive educational context characterised by multilingualism, diverse educational experiences and immediate communicative needs beyond the classroom. Although research has increasingly acknowledged the pedagogical value of purposeful first-language use, comparatively little attention has been paid to how learners within this context evaluate its role in supporting English language learning. Most existing evidence continues to derive from school, university or overseas EFL settings, leaving multilingual adult ESOL classrooms comparatively underrepresented within the literature. Addressing this gap is important not only for extending current understanding of strategic first-language use but also for informing context-sensitive pedagogical practice within one of the United Kingdom's most linguistically and culturally diverse educational sectors.

Summary and Rationale for the Present Study

The literature reviewed in this chapter demonstrates a clear shift from viewing learners' first language (L1) as an obstacle to English language learning towards recognising its potential as a strategic pedagogical resource when used purposefully and contextually (Cook, 2001; Hall & Cook, 2012; Kim & Choi, 2024). Rather than advocating either exclusive target-language use or unrestricted first-language use, contemporary scholarship increasingly supports a balanced and context-sensitive approach in which L1 serves identifiable pedagogical purposes. Research has further shown that learners generally value selective L1 use when it facilitates comprehension, classroom participation and language development without reducing meaningful opportunities to communicate in English. Studies have also demonstrated that L1 performs a range of cognitive, instructional, affective and social functions that can support language learning when employed judiciously and strategically (Macaro, 2009; Hall & Cook, 2012; Rahmany et al., 2025). Overall, the literature indicates that the central question is no longer whether L1 should be used, but under what pedagogical conditions its use is most likely to enhance English language learning.

Despite these advances, three important gaps remain within the existing literature. Most existing evidence derives from school, university or EFL settings, leaving adult ESOL learners studying within UK Further Education comparatively underrepresented (Baynham & Simpson, 2010; Prilutskaya, 2021). Furthermore, previous research has primarily examined whether learners support or oppose first-language use, while comparatively less attention has been devoted to understanding how learners themselves evaluate the pedagogical appropriateness of different forms of L1 use. Although the literature identifies numerous pedagogical functions of L1, fewer studies have explored how learners interpret these functions within their own multilingual learning experiences or how contextual factors shape these judgements (Hall & Cook, 2012; Antony et al., 2024).

Rather than asking whether first-language use should occur in English language classrooms, the present study investigates how adult ESOL learners themselves evaluate when, why and for what pedagogical purposes strategic first-language use should occur within the distinctive multilingual context of UK Further Education. Using a qualitative case study approach, the study explores learners' perceptions of strategic first-language use and the conditions under which they believe it facilitates or constrains English language learning. By foregrounding learners' voices, the study contributes to current understandings of multilingual pedagogy by demonstrating that adult ESOL learners conceptualise strategic first-language use as a flexible pedagogical resource whose educational value

depends upon purposeful, context-sensitive and developmental implementation. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that learners exercise agency by making informed judgements about when, why and by whom first-language use is pedagogically appropriate, while recognising that its role should evolve alongside increasing English proficiency. By providing qualitative evidence from the under-researched context of UK Further Education, the study extends current understanding of strategic first-language use and offers practical insights for ESOL teachers, teacher educators and curriculum developers seeking to implement principled, learner-responsive multilingual pedagogies.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore adult ESOL learners' perceptions of strategic first-language (L1) use within a UK Further Education college. A qualitative approach was considered most appropriate because the study sought to understand how participants interpreted and evaluated strategic first-language use within their own educational context rather than to measure predetermined variables or test hypotheses. Qualitative research enables researchers to investigate complex educational phenomena from the perspectives of participants, providing rich and contextualised insights into how individuals construct meaning from their experiences (Flick, 2014; Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

The study was informed by an interpretivist perspective, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and that meaning is developed through individuals' experiences and social interactions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Consistent with this perspective, the research sought to understand how adult ESOL learners interpreted and evaluated strategic first-language use within their own educational context rather than identify objective or universally applicable truths. This philosophical position aligns closely with qualitative case study research and the use of semi-structured interviews to explore participants' lived experiences.

A case study approach was selected because it allowed the investigation of learners' perceptions within their natural educational setting. Rather than seeking statistical generalisation, the study aimed to develop an in-depth understanding of how adult ESOL learners evaluated the pedagogical role of L1 in a specific Further Education context. This approach was particularly appropriate given the study's emphasis on the interaction between classroom language practices and the distinctive multilingual environment in which participants were learning. The design therefore enabled detailed exploration of participants' views while preserving the contextual factors that shaped their experiences.

Consistent with the interpretive nature of qualitative inquiry, the study sought to understand how participants themselves perceived and explained the role of first-language use in English language learning. Semi-structured interviews provided opportunities for participants to describe their experiences in their own words, allowing the researcher to explore emerging issues while maintaining sufficient flexibility to probe for clarification and elaboration. Accordingly, the qualitative case study design provided a coherent methodological framework for addressing the study's research questions

while generating rich, contextually grounded insights into learners' perceptions of strategic first-language use.

Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at a Further Education (FE) college in Birmingham, United Kingdom, which provides English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programmes ranging from Entry Level to Level 2. The college serves adult learners from diverse linguistic, cultural and educational backgrounds, including immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers and other multilingual residents seeking to improve their English language proficiency for employment, further education and everyday communication. ESOL provision within the college is designed to develop learners' speaking, listening, reading and writing skills and is assessed through the City & Guilds examination framework. This setting provided an authentic and information-rich context for investigating learners' perceptions of strategic first-language (L1) use, reflecting the multilingual and socially diverse characteristics of adult ESOL provision discussed in the literature review.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that they could provide rich and relevant information relating to the research questions (Patton, 2015). As participants were recruited from the researcher's own ESOL classes, the sample also represented an element of convenience sampling. However, participant selection was guided primarily by the principles of purposive sampling, with the aim of identifying information-rich learners who possessed sufficient experience of adult ESOL education to provide informed reflections on the pedagogical role of strategic first-language use. This approach is consistent with qualitative case study research, where the emphasis is placed on selecting participants capable of generating detailed, contextually grounded insights into the phenomenon under investigation rather than achieving statistical representativeness (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2018).

The final sample comprised eight adult ESOL learners, including four male and four female participants. All participants were non-native speakers of English, had successfully progressed through earlier ESOL levels and were studying at Level 2, the highest level within the college's ESOL programme at the time of the study. This ensured that participants possessed sufficient experience of ESOL learning to discuss classroom language practices from an informed perspective. The participants represented five first-language backgrounds—Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Pashto and Somali—reflecting the multilingual nature of adult ESOL classrooms within UK Further Education. Participant characteristics are summarised in Table 1.

Characteristic	Description
Research setting	Further Education college, Birmingham, United Kingdom
Programme	Adult ESOL
Number of participants	8
Gender	4 male, 4 female
English proficiency	ESOL Level 2

Characteristic	Description
Sampling strategy	Purposive sampling
First-language backgrounds	Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Pashto and Somali
Previous ESOL experience	All participants had progressed from lower ESOL levels to Level 2
Educational background	All participants had completed their previous education outside the United Kingdom

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

The multilingual composition of the sample closely reflected the linguistic diversity typically found in adult ESOL provision within UK Further Education, thereby providing an appropriate context for exploring learners' perceptions of strategic first-language use.

Although the sample was relatively small, this is consistent with qualitative case study research, where the emphasis is placed on obtaining rich, contextually grounded accounts rather than statistically generalisable findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Within qualitative inquiry, the value of a sample lies in the depth and richness of the information it generates rather than its numerical size. Participants were therefore selected because they could provide detailed reflections on their experiences of first-language use in adult ESOL classrooms, enabling the study to address its research questions in depth. The diversity of participants' linguistic backgrounds further strengthened the study by allowing exploration of learners' perceptions across a multilingual adult ESOL context.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured online interviews, which were selected because they enabled participants to describe their perceptions and experiences of strategic first-language (L1) use in their own words while allowing the researcher to explore emerging issues in greater depth. Semi-structured interviews are particularly well suited to qualitative research that seeks to understand participants' perspectives, as they provide sufficient structure to address the research questions while maintaining the flexibility to probe, clarify and follow up on participants' responses (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Given that the study sought to explore learners' perceptions rather than measure predetermined variables, this approach was considered the most appropriate method of data collection.

All interviews were conducted online using Microsoft Teams, providing participants with a familiar and accessible environment while allowing flexibility in scheduling and participation. The online format enabled participants to take part from locations convenient to them without the need for travel while maintaining the quality of interaction required for qualitative interviewing. Each interview lasted approximately 15–25 minutes, depending on the extent to which participants elaborated on their responses. With participants' informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim to facilitate detailed and systematic analysis.

An interview guide comprising open-ended questions was developed to align directly with the study's research aims and the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. The questions explored learners' perceptions of strategic first-language use, its influence on English language learning, and the pedagogical situations in which participants considered L1 to be beneficial or less appropriate. Open-ended questioning encouraged participants to describe their experiences in detail, while follow-up questions and probing techniques were used where appropriate to clarify responses, explore emerging ideas and obtain richer descriptions (Dörnyei, 2007; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Care was taken to ensure that questions were clear, neutral and non-leading, thereby encouraging participants to express their views openly and honestly. The interview schedule is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Prior to the main study, a pilot interview was conducted with a Level 2 ESOL learner to evaluate the clarity, sequencing and wording of the interview questions, as well as to familiarise the researcher with the online interview process. Feedback from the pilot resulted in minor revisions to the wording and sequencing of several questions, improving their clarity and the overall flow of the interview schedule. During the main phase of data collection, rapport was established through informal conversation at the beginning of each interview to create a relaxed and supportive environment. Participants were reminded that there were no right or wrong answers and were encouraged to speak freely about their learning experiences. Where necessary, follow-up prompts and clarification questions were used to ensure that participants' intended meanings were accurately understood while avoiding leading or suggestive questioning. These procedures contributed to the credibility of the data by encouraging open, detailed and authentic participant responses.

Overall, the combination of carefully designed semi-structured interviews, pilot testing, systematic audio recording and verbatim transcription generated a rich and contextually grounded dataset that enabled an in-depth exploration of learners' perceptions of strategic first-language use within an authentic adult ESOL setting. This methodological approach ensured that participants' experiences were captured comprehensively while maintaining the flexibility required to explore emerging issues during the interviews. The resulting interview data formed the basis for the thematic analysis described in the following section.

Data Analysis

The interview data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, a flexible and widely adopted qualitative approach for identifying, analysing and interpreting patterns of meaning across a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). Thematic analysis was considered particularly appropriate because the study sought to explore learners' perceptions of strategic first-language (L1) use rather than test predetermined hypotheses. Its flexibility enabled themes to be developed inductively from participants' accounts while remaining closely aligned with the study's research questions. Consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2021) approach, the analysis was viewed as an iterative and reflexive process rather than a strictly linear sequence of analytical steps.

Following each interview, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. The researcher listened to the recordings several times while reviewing the transcripts to ensure accuracy and become thoroughly familiar with the data. Initial notes and analytical observations were recorded during this process to capture emerging ideas, patterns and potential relationships within the dataset. This process of

familiarisation enabled the researcher to engage deeply with participants' accounts and provided the foundation for the subsequent coding and theme development.

Data analysis followed the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021). First, the transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve familiarity with the dataset. Second, meaningful segments of text relevant to the research questions were assigned initial codes through manual coding. Third, related codes were compared and grouped into potential themes. Fourth, these themes were reviewed, refined and checked against the complete dataset to ensure that they accurately represented participants' responses. Fifth, the themes were defined and named to capture their central meanings. Finally, the themes were organised into a coherent analytical narrative that addressed the study's research questions.

The initial coding process was conducted manually by underlining relevant sections of each transcript and assigning descriptive labels to meaningful words and phrases. Consistent with the procedures adopted in the original study, thirteen initial codes were identified across the interview transcripts before being reviewed, compared and refined into broader themes. Examples of early codes included *feeling more comfortable using L1*, *difficulty expressing ideas in English*, and *using L1 to understand grammar*. These codes were subsequently integrated into higher-order themes representing learners' perceptions of strategic first-language use.

Following the initial manual coding, NVivo qualitative data analysis software was used to organise, retrieve and manage the coded data more efficiently. The software supported the systematic organisation of codes and facilitated comparisons across participants; however, the analytical interpretation remained the responsibility of the researcher. Themes were generated through careful interpretation of the interview data rather than by the software itself. Throughout the analytical process, the researcher moved iteratively between the transcripts, codes and developing themes, refining interpretations and ensuring that the final themes accurately reflected the dataset as a whole.

This systematic process of familiarisation, coding, theme development, refinement and interpretation enabled the identification of coherent themes that captured learners' perceptions of strategic first-language use within an adult ESOL context. The analytical procedures enhanced the transparency, credibility and trustworthiness of the findings by ensuring that the reported themes remained firmly grounded in participants' own accounts while directly addressing the study's research questions.

Ethical Considerations and Research Trustworthiness

The study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles for qualitative research. Prior to data collection, permission to conduct the study was obtained from the relevant institutional gatekeeper, enabling access to participants and ensuring compliance with institutional and ethical requirements. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews commenced.

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK

Participants received an information sheet outlining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty, and the intended use of the data. To protect participants' identities, all interview data were anonymised, and pseudonyms were used throughout the reporting of the findings. Audio recordings and interview transcripts were stored securely and were accessible only to the researcher. Participants were also informed that the interviews would be audio-recorded for transcription and analysis purposes before providing their consent.

To enhance the research trustworthiness of the study, procedures were implemented throughout the research process in accordance with the principles of credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and further elaborated by Nowell et al. (2017) for qualitative thematic analysis. Credibility was strengthened through the use of a pilot interview, which enabled refinement of the interview schedule before the main study commenced. During data collection, rapport was established with participants prior to each interview, open-ended questioning and probing techniques were used to encourage detailed responses, and interviews were conducted in a neutral and non-judgemental manner. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, allowing repeated engagement with the data throughout the analytical process.

Dependability was supported by adopting a consistent interview protocol for all participants and by maintaining a clear audit trail of each stage of the research process, from participant recruitment and data collection to coding and theme development. Confirmability was enhanced by ensuring that the findings remained grounded in participants' own accounts rather than the researcher's assumptions or preconceptions. Throughout the analytical process, the transcripts were revisited repeatedly to verify the consistency of coding decisions and the interpretation of emerging themes. Transferability was addressed by providing a detailed description of the research setting, participant characteristics and methodological procedures, enabling readers to determine the potential applicability of the findings to similar adult ESOL contexts. These procedures collectively enhanced the methodological rigour, transparency and trustworthiness of the study, providing confidence that the findings faithfully represented participants' perspectives on strategic first-language use.

RESULTS/FINDINGS

This section presents the findings derived from the thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with eight adult ESOL learners studying at a Further Education college in the United Kingdom. Three overarching themes emerged from the analysis, addressing the study's research questions concerning learners' perceptions of strategic first-language (L1) use, its influence on motivation and confidence, and the pedagogical functions it serves within multilingual ESOL classrooms.

The findings are presented thematically and are illustrated using participants' own words to provide evidence for the identified patterns across the dataset. In keeping with the principles of qualitative reporting, this chapter focuses on describing participants' perspectives rather than interpreting them in relation to previous research. The interpretation of the findings, together with their theoretical and pedagogical implications, is presented in Chapter 5.

This chapter presents the findings derived from the thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews conducted with eight adult ESOL learners studying at a Further Education college in the United Kingdom. Three overarching themes emerged from the analysis, corresponding to the study's research questions concerning learners' perceptions of strategic first-language (L1) use, its influence on motivation and confidence, and the pedagogical functions it serves within multilingual ESOL classrooms. The findings are presented using participants' own words to illustrate the identified themes and patterns across the dataset. The purpose of this chapter is to report participants' perspectives rather than interpret them in relation to previous research. Interpretation of the findings and their implications is presented in Chapter 5.

Learners' Perceptions of Strategic First-Language Use

The first theme explores participants' perceptions of strategic first-language (L1) use in adult ESOL classrooms and the conditions under which they considered its use pedagogically appropriate. Analysis of the interview data indicated that participants generally viewed L1 as a valuable pedagogical resource when it was used selectively to support English language learning. Although opinions differed regarding the frequency and circumstances in which L1 should be used, the overall pattern suggested that learners did not support unrestricted use of the first language. Instead, they favoured its strategic use for specific learning purposes while recognising that English should remain the principal language of classroom communication. Three interconnected subthemes emerged from the analysis: (1) overall attitudes towards strategic L1 use, (2) teachers' versus peers' use of L1, and (3) changing attitudes as English proficiency increased.

Overall Attitudes towards Strategic First-Language Use

Analysis of the interview data indicated that six of the eight participants expressed positive attitudes towards the strategic use of first-language (L1), while two adopted a more cautious position, emphasising that its use should become increasingly limited as learners' English proficiency developed. Across the interviews, participants consistently distinguished between strategic and excessive first-language use. Rather than advocating unrestricted use of L1, they viewed it as a valuable pedagogical resource that could facilitate learning when communication or understanding became difficult, while recognising that English should remain the primary language of classroom interaction.

Several participants explained that they used their first language selectively when communicating with classmates who shared the same linguistic background, particularly when clarification or explanation was required. For example, one participant commented:

"Yeah, sometimes when we have some kind of colleague in our class that understands our language."
(Participant 3)

Similarly, another participant described using Arabic only with classmates who spoke the same first language:

"Yes, I do. Normally with Arabic native speakers, I prefer to use Arabic language." (Participant 4)

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK

Not all participants relied on their first language to the same extent. A small number reported that they rarely used L1 during lessons because they believed that increasing English proficiency should be accompanied by greater reliance on English. As one participant explained:

"No, rarely! Because I don't need to. When you are in the advanced level you don't need to talk in your mother tongue." (Participant 2)

The findings indicate that participants generally regarded first-language use as beneficial when it was employed strategically to support learning rather than as a substitute for English. Although the frequency of L1 use varied across learners, there was broad agreement that English should remain the principal language of instruction and classroom interaction, with the first language serving a complementary role when it fulfilled a clear pedagogical purpose. This pattern provides the foundation for the following subsection, which examines learners' differing perceptions of teachers' and peers' use of strategic first-language support.

Teachers' versus Peers' Use of Strategic First-Language Use

One of the most distinctive findings to emerge from the interviews was the clear distinction participants made between teachers' and peers' use of strategic first-language (L1) support in the classroom. Although participants generally viewed strategic L1 use positively, they were noticeably more supportive of teachers using L1 selectively to facilitate learning than of classmates using L1 during classroom interaction. Most learners believed that teachers could employ L1 strategically to explain difficult concepts, clarify meaning and support understanding, whereas frequent use of L1 among students was viewed more cautiously because it could reduce opportunities to practise English. This distinction emerged consistently across the interviews and represented one of the most prominent patterns within the dataset.

Regarding teachers' use of L1, six of the eight participants expressed positive attitudes, one participant adopted a neutral position, and only one participant expressed a negative view. Participants generally believed that teachers' strategic use of L1 could facilitate understanding, particularly when explaining unfamiliar vocabulary or complex concepts. As one participant explained:

"Yes, yes... I think it is okay and may be helpful." (Participant 1)

Similarly, another participant highlighted the value of teachers sharing learners' first language when explaining meaning:

"Yes, that will be really helpful. I can say then we will know the true meaning of it." (Participant 3)

In contrast, participants expressed more varied opinions regarding L1 use among classmates. Several learners preferred English to remain the principal language of peer interaction and reported feeling uncomfortable when classmates communicated extensively in their shared first language. One participant commented:

"I feel I am not really okay with this." (Participant 1)

Another participant similarly explained:

"I am not really comfortable if they speak Farsi." (Participant 2)

However, this perspective was not universal. A small number of participants described feeling more comfortable and emotionally connected when interacting with classmates who shared their first language. As one participant reflected:

"Oh, I feel really happy... You know this is your language... when someone talks to you in your language, that means he's talking with you from the heart." (Participant 3)

The findings demonstrate that participants clearly distinguished between pedagogically purposeful teacher use of L1 and routine peer use of L1. While strategic teacher use was widely regarded as beneficial for supporting learning, participants adopted a more cautious stance towards frequent L1 use among classmates because they believed it could reduce opportunities to practise English. At the same time, learners recognised that peer use of a shared first language could provide reassurance and emotional support in particular situations. This distinction provides an important foundation for the following subsection, which examines how learners' attitudes towards first-language use evolved as their English proficiency increased.

Changing Attitudes towards Strategic First-Language Use as English Proficiency Increased

One of the clearest patterns to emerge from the interviews was participants' belief that the role of the first language should evolve as learners became more proficient in English. Although participants generally supported strategic first-language (L1) use, they consistently emphasised that its use should decrease as learners developed greater confidence and competence in English. Rather than advocating continuous reliance on L1, participants viewed it as a temporary form of pedagogical support that became progressively less necessary as proficiency increased. This perspective was shared across participants regardless of their first-language background and represented one of the strongest patterns within the dataset.

Several participants explained that L1 was particularly valuable during the early stages of language learning, when unfamiliar vocabulary, grammar and classroom instructions presented significant challenges. However, they believed that learners should gradually become less dependent on their first language as their English proficiency improved. One participant explained:

"No, rarely! Because I don't need to. When you are in the advanced level you don't need to talk in your mother tongue." (Participant 2)

This view was echoed by other participants who acknowledged that, although they continued to use L1 occasionally, it was employed less frequently than during the earlier stages of their language learning. For example, one participant remarked:

"Sometimes I use it really (L1), though at this time our level is high." (Participant 7)

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK

Although participants differed in the extent to which they continued to use L1, there was broad agreement that increasing English proficiency should be accompanied by greater use of English during classroom interaction. Participants therefore viewed strategic L1 use as a temporary form of linguistic support rather than a permanent feature of language learning. As learners became more proficient, they believed that English should increasingly replace the first language as the principal medium of classroom communication, while L1 remained available for occasional clarification or explanation when genuinely required.

The findings indicate that participants' support for strategic first-language use was closely linked to learners' level of English proficiency. Rather than viewing L1 as either consistently beneficial or consistently undesirable, participants perceived its educational value as evolving alongside learners' developing language competence. This subsection completes the first theme by demonstrating that learners' positive perceptions of strategic L1 use were consistently accompanied by the expectation that its role should diminish as English proficiency increased.

Theme 1 Summary

Collectively, the findings presented in Theme 1 demonstrate that participants generally viewed strategic first-language (L1) use as a valuable pedagogical resource when employed selectively to support English language learning. While learners expressed positive attitudes towards purposeful L1 use, they consistently distinguished between appropriate and excessive use, recognising that English should remain the principal language of classroom communication. Participants also differentiated between teachers' and peers' use of L1, expressing stronger support for strategic teacher use than for routine peer use. Furthermore, learners emphasised that reliance on the first language should decrease as English proficiency developed, indicating that they viewed L1 as a temporary form of pedagogical support whose role should diminish as learners became increasingly confident and proficient in English.

Strategic First-Language Use, Motivation and Confidence

The second theme explores participants' perceptions of how strategic first-language (L1) use influenced their motivation, confidence and willingness to participate in English language learning. Overall, participants described L1 as having a positive effect on their classroom experiences when it was used selectively to support learning. Many participants explained that strategic L1 use reduced feelings of anxiety, increased their confidence to participate and enabled them to communicate more effectively during lessons. However, participants also recognised that excessive reliance on L1 could reduce opportunities to practise English and, for some learners, have a negative influence on motivation. Three interconnected subthemes emerged from the analysis: (1) increased confidence and reduced anxiety, (2) classroom participation and willingness to communicate, and (3) reservations about excessive L1 use.

Increased Confidence and Reduced Anxiety

Five of the eight participants reported that strategic L1 use increased their confidence and helped them feel more comfortable in the classroom, whereas three participants expressed reservations and reported

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK

feeling less comfortable when L1 was used. Participants who viewed L1 positively frequently associated it with reduced anxiety, greater emotional security and increased confidence when communicating in English. Rather than perceiving L1 as a substitute for English, they described it as a supportive resource that enabled them to overcome moments of uncertainty and continue participating in classroom activities.

Several participants explained that selective use of their first language gave them greater confidence to contribute during lessons. One participant commented:

"I do feel confident when we speak in our own language..." (Participant 3)

Another participant explained that using Arabic reduced the fear of making mistakes when communicating:

"Yes, sure (feel motivated) because you know English is not your first language so you will make mistakes... but when you talk in Arabic... you know you won't make a mistake at all." (Participant 4)

Participants also linked strategic L1 use with reduced stress and a greater sense of comfort within the classroom. One learner explained:

"Yeah, yeah definitely (feels comfortable), especially now with too much stress every day..." (Participant 1)

However, these views were not shared by all participants. Three learners reported that they did not feel more comfortable when L1 was used during lessons. As one participant stated:

"Actually, I am not comfortable." (Participant 2)

Overall, the findings demonstrate that most participants associated strategic L1 use with increased confidence, reduced anxiety and a more supportive learning environment. Nevertheless, the differing views expressed by a minority of learners suggest that the motivational value of L1 depends on how, when and why it is used rather than on its presence alone. This finding provides the basis for the following subsection, which examines how increased confidence influenced learners' classroom participation and willingness to communicate.

Strategic First-Language Use and Willingness to Communicate

Analysis of the interview data indicated that strategic first-language (L1) use also influenced participants' willingness to communicate during English language lessons. Several learners explained that having access to selective L1 support encouraged them to ask questions, seek clarification and participate more actively in classroom activities. Participants associated this greater readiness to communicate with reduced linguistic uncertainty, particularly when they encountered unfamiliar vocabulary, complex concepts or difficulties expressing themselves in English. Rather than replacing

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK

English, purposeful first-language use appeared to provide temporary support that enabled learners to remain actively engaged in classroom interaction.

One participant explained that being able to use a shared first language encouraged greater participation during lessons:

"I do feel confident when we speak in our own language..." (Participant 3)

Similarly, another participant described how using Arabic reduced the fear of making mistakes and made it easier to communicate:

"Yes, sure... because you know English is not your first language so you will make mistakes... but when you talk in Arabic... you know you won't make a mistake at all." (Participant 4)

Participants' responses further suggested that increased classroom engagement was closely linked to improved comprehension. Learners explained that when they were able to confirm meaning or clarify difficult points through occasional L1 support, they felt more willing to contribute to discussions, ask questions and continue interacting in English. In this way, participants viewed selective first-language support not as an alternative to English but as a temporary bridge that sustained communication and encouraged continued engagement with classroom learning.

The findings indicate that strategic L1 use encouraged learners' willingness to communicate by reducing linguistic uncertainty and supporting meaningful participation in classroom activities. Importantly, participants consistently emphasised that this support should facilitate, rather than replace, communication in English. Their responses therefore suggest that the educational value of strategic first-language use lay in helping learners remain actively engaged in English language learning while gradually developing greater independence in the target language.

Reservations about Excessive First-Language Use

Although participants generally recognised the motivational benefits of strategic first-language (L1) use, many also expressed reservations about its excessive use in English language classrooms. Rather than opposing L1 itself, participants emphasised that its educational value depended on being used selectively and purposefully. Several learners believed that frequent reliance on the first language could reduce opportunities to practise English, limit exposure to the target language and slow the development of independent communication skills. These responses suggest that participants viewed L1 as a temporary source of support rather than a replacement for English.

The interview data also revealed that not all learners experienced L1 use as motivating. Three of the eight participants reported that they did not feel more comfortable or motivated when L1 was used during lessons. One participant stated:

"Actually, I am not comfortable." (Participant 2)

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK

Rather than rejecting first-language support altogether, these participants appeared to prefer greater exposure to English and believed that more frequent use of the target language better supported their learning. Their responses indicate that learners' motivation was influenced not simply by the presence of L1, but by how, when and why it was incorporated into classroom teaching.

Overall, the findings indicate that participants' support for strategic L1 use was consistently accompanied by an awareness of its potential limitations. Learners recognised that while selective first-language support could reduce anxiety, encourage participation and facilitate learning, excessive reliance on L1 might reduce opportunities for meaningful communication in English. Consequently, participants favoured a balanced approach in which the first language functioned as a pedagogical resource without diminishing learners' engagement with the target language.

Theme 2 Summary

Collectively, the findings presented in Theme 2 demonstrate that participants generally perceived strategic first-language (L1) use as having a positive influence on their motivation, confidence and classroom participation when employed purposefully to support English language learning. Learners explained that selective L1 use reduced anxiety, increased confidence and encouraged greater willingness to communicate, particularly when they encountered unfamiliar language or experienced difficulty expressing themselves in English. At the same time, participants consistently recognised that these motivational benefits depended on the strategic and limited use of L1. Excessive reliance on the first language was viewed as potentially reducing opportunities to practise English and develop greater linguistic independence. Overall, participants regarded strategic L1 use as a supportive pedagogical resource that enhanced engagement while maintaining English as the principal language of classroom communication.

Pedagogical Functions of Strategic First-Language Use

The third theme explores participants' perceptions of the pedagogical functions served by strategic first-language (L1) use in adult ESOL classrooms. Analysis of the interview data indicated that participants regarded L1 as fulfilling several complementary educational functions that supported their English language learning. Rather than viewing first-language use as a single instructional strategy, learners described a range of situations in which strategic L1 use facilitated comprehension, supported language learning and enhanced classroom interaction. Participants consistently emphasised that these functions were most valuable when L1 was employed selectively to complement, rather than replace, communication in English. Three interconnected subthemes emerged from the analysis: (1) supporting comprehension, (2) supporting language learning, and (3) supporting classroom interaction.

Supporting Comprehension

One of the clearest findings to emerge from the interviews was that participants viewed strategic first-language (L1) use as an important means of supporting comprehension. Translation and understanding meaning were the most frequently reported pedagogical functions, with six of the eight participants

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK

explaining that they used their first language to understand unfamiliar vocabulary, difficult concepts, idiomatic expressions and words with multiple meanings. Participants consistently described purposeful first-language support as enabling them to understand English more accurately and efficiently, particularly when classroom explanations alone were insufficient.

Several participants explained that translation helped them make sense of unfamiliar vocabulary by connecting new English words with their first language. One participant reflected:

"If we translate every single word into Urdu so we can know what's the meaning of it and then we just proceed with the word... it helps a lot..." (Participant 3)

Another participant described using Persian to understand complex ideas encountered during reading activities:

"...to help me understand the concept because when, for example, I am reading something which is really difficult and complicated I try to find the meaning in Persian." (Participant 2)

Participants' responses indicated that translation was not viewed as an end in itself, but as a strategy for overcoming comprehension difficulties and enabling continued engagement with English. In addition to supporting understanding of new vocabulary and complex concepts, learners explained that they occasionally relied on their first language to interpret idiomatic expressions and words with multiple meanings. These responses suggest that participants perceived selective L1 use as a practical means of facilitating comprehension while maintaining progress in English language learning.

The findings indicate that participants regarded comprehension support as the principal pedagogical function of strategic first-language use. Rather than replacing English, learners viewed the first language as a temporary scaffold that enabled them to overcome difficulties in understanding before returning to communication in the target language. This emphasis on comprehension also provided the foundation for broader language learning functions, including grammar, vocabulary development and the consolidation of new knowledge, which are explored in the following subsection.

Supporting Language Learning

Beyond supporting comprehension, participants also perceived strategic first-language (L1) use as facilitating broader aspects of language learning, particularly grammar and vocabulary development. Although these functions were reported less frequently than those related to comprehension, several learners explained that selective use of their first language enabled them to understand grammatical structures, acquire unfamiliar vocabulary and reinforce newly learned language. Participants viewed L1 not as an alternative to English instruction but as a temporary learning resource that helped them make sense of new language before continuing to engage with English.

The interview data indicated that two of the eight participants reported using their first language to clarify grammatical points that they found difficult to understand in English. Participants explained that occasional reference to their L1 enabled them to understand complex grammatical structures more clearly before returning to English language practice. As one participant commented:

"I mean in reading and in grammar sometimes you may need to speak in Arabic..." (Participant 4)

Participants also identified vocabulary learning as an important pedagogical function of strategic L1 use. Three of the eight participants explained that they occasionally relied on their first language when encountering unfamiliar words or expressions, particularly when explanation in English alone was insufficient. One participant described this process as follows:

"...sometimes it is hard to understand something, some new words or we are stuck in something... so we wanted to know in our language so that we can understand more." (Participant 3)

Participants' responses suggest that first-language support contributed to language learning by helping them clarify grammatical structures, acquire new vocabulary and reinforce their understanding of unfamiliar language. Rather than encouraging dependence on translation, learners described selective L1 use as a means of strengthening their understanding before continuing to engage with English. The findings indicate that participants perceived strategic first-language use as supporting language learning through clarification, reinforcement and the gradual development of linguistic knowledge. These benefits were consistently viewed as being realised when the first language complemented, rather than replaced, English language learning.

Supporting Classroom Interaction

Beyond supporting comprehension and language learning, participants also perceived strategic first-language (L1) use as facilitating classroom interaction and interpersonal communication. Learners explained that occasional use of their first language enabled them to express emotions more naturally, establish rapport with classmates who shared the same linguistic background and seek support when communication in English became difficult. Rather than viewing L1 solely as a linguistic resource, participants also regarded it as a means of maintaining positive social relationships and promoting collaborative learning within the multilingual ESOL classroom. These responses indicate that strategic L1 use served important interpersonal as well as pedagogical functions.

Several participants described using their first language to express feelings more naturally than they could in English. One participant explained:

"I feel really happy... You know this is your language... when someone talks to you in your language, that means he's talking with you from the heart." (Participant 3)

This response suggests that, for some learners, a shared first language created a stronger sense of personal connection and emotional comfort during classroom interaction.

Participants also described using their first language to communicate with classmates when clarification or mutual support was required. As one participant commented:

"Yes, I do. Normally with Arabic native speakers, I prefer to use Arabic language." (Participant 4)

Rather than replacing English during lessons, participants explained that these interactions generally occurred when they needed to clarify meaning, seek assistance or support classmates who shared the same first language. Learners therefore viewed purposeful L1 use as facilitating collaboration while allowing classroom activities to continue in English.

Participants' responses indicate that strategic first-language use also contributed to creating a more inclusive and supportive classroom environment. By enabling learners to express emotions, build rapport and provide peer support when necessary, selective L1 use helped sustain classroom interaction without undermining the overall emphasis on English. The findings indicate that participants viewed first-language use as serving an important social function alongside its pedagogical role in language learning.

The findings further indicate that participants perceived strategic first-language use as supporting classroom interaction by strengthening communication, facilitating peer collaboration and enabling learners to express themselves more naturally in appropriate situations. However, these social benefits were consistently viewed as complementary to, rather than a substitute for, meaningful interaction in English, reinforcing participants' broader preference for selective and purposeful L1 use.

Theme 3 Summary

Collectively, the findings presented in Theme 3 demonstrate that participants perceived strategic first-language (L1) use as serving a range of complementary pedagogical functions that supported their English language learning. Learners consistently identified comprehension as the primary function of strategic L1 use, explaining that it enabled them to understand unfamiliar vocabulary, complex concepts and challenging language more effectively. Participants also described first-language use as supporting grammar and vocabulary development, reinforcing new learning and facilitating classroom interaction by promoting collaboration, emotional expression and peer support. Across all three functions, participants emphasised that the educational value of L1 depended on its selective and purposeful use to complement, rather than replace, communication in English.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the findings arising from the thematic analysis of interviews with eight adult ESOL learners studying within a UK Further Education context. Three overarching themes emerged from the data, demonstrating that participants viewed strategic first-language (L1) use as a valuable pedagogical resource when employed selectively to support English language learning. Across all three themes, learners consistently emphasised that the educational value of L1 depended not on how frequently it was used, but on how purposefully it supported learning while maintaining English as the principal language of classroom communication. The following chapter discusses these findings in relation to previous research and considers their theoretical and pedagogical implications.

DISCUSSION

This chapter interprets the findings in relation to previous research on strategic first-language (L1) use, multilingual pedagogy and learner agency. Rather than restating the results, the discussion examines how the findings extend current understanding of strategic first-language use within adult ESOL education. The chapter is organised around four interconnected contributions emerging from the study: (1) strategic first-language use as a pedagogical resource, (2) learner agency in evaluating multilingual classroom practices, (3) the developmental role of strategic L1 support across proficiency levels, and (4) implications for adult ESOL teaching and policy.

Strategic First-Language Use as a Pedagogical Resource

The findings demonstrate that adult ESOL learners consistently perceived strategic first-language (L1) use as a valuable pedagogical resource when employed selectively to support English language learning. Rather than advocating unrestricted use of learners' first language, participants emphasised that its educational value depended on how, when and why it was used. Across all three themes identified in the findings, learners associated purposeful L1 use with improved comprehension, enhanced language learning and greater classroom participation, while consistently maintaining that English should remain the principal language of classroom communication. These findings suggest that adult ESOL learners adopt a balanced and context-sensitive perspective on classroom language use, viewing strategic L1 support as complementary to, rather than a replacement for, English-medium instruction.

This interpretation reinforces the growing body of research challenging monolingual approaches to English language teaching. Cook (2001) argued that learners' first language should be recognised as a legitimate instructional resource rather than excluded from the language classroom, while Hall and Cook (2012) similarly concluded that judicious L1 use can facilitate comprehension, classroom interaction and learner engagement. Macaro (2009) likewise maintained that pedagogical decisions regarding first-language use should be guided by instructional purpose rather than ideological commitment to English-only policies. Taken as a whole, these foundational studies shifted the debate from whether L1 should be used towards the more pedagogically meaningful question of how strategic first-language use can best support second-language learning.

Recent scholarship has continued this shift while emphasising the importance of context-sensitive implementation. Systematic reviews by Prilutskaya (2021), Kim and Weng (2022), and Huang and Chalmers (2023) conclude that pedagogical translanguaging and strategic multilingual practices can support learner comprehension, engagement and participation across a range of educational settings. At the same time, these reviews caution that the effectiveness of first-language use depends upon learner characteristics, instructional objectives and classroom context rather than representing a universally applicable teaching strategy. Consequently, recent literature increasingly advocates principled and purposeful multilingual pedagogy in place of either rigid English-only approaches or unrestricted first-language use.

The findings extend these conclusions in three important respects. First, participants consistently distinguished between strategic and excessive first-language use, demonstrating that learners

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK

themselves recognised the pedagogical conditions under which L1 facilitated English language development. Second, participants expressed stronger support for selective teacher use than routine peer use, suggesting that they perceived first-language support as most beneficial when it served clear instructional purposes. Third, learners consistently argued that reliance on L1 should decrease as English proficiency developed, indicating that they viewed first-language support as a temporary scaffold rather than a permanent classroom practice. These findings resonate with recent learner-perception research reporting that learners value carefully managed teacher use of L1 for supporting grammar, vocabulary and comprehension while simultaneously recognising the importance of maximising opportunities for English communication.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of the present study is that it foregrounds adult ESOL learners as informed evaluators of classroom language practices rather than passive recipients of teachers' instructional decisions. Whereas much previous research has concentrated on teachers' beliefs or the effectiveness of pedagogical translanguaging, the present findings demonstrate that adult learners themselves make sophisticated judgements concerning when, why, by whom and to what extent first-language support should be incorporated into English language teaching. This learner-centred perspective adds an important dimension to current discussions of multilingual pedagogy by illustrating that adult ESOL learners are capable of evaluating classroom language practices according to pedagogical purpose rather than ideological preference.

In sum, the discussion suggests that strategic first-language use is best conceptualised as a pedagogical resource rather than an obstacle to second-language acquisition. At the same time, the study makes a distinctive contribution by providing evidence from an adult ESOL Further Education context in the United Kingdom, an area that remains comparatively underrepresented within the literature. Rather than supporting either English-only policies or unrestricted multilingual practices, participants consistently advocated a principled, context-sensitive approach in which purposeful first-language use complements—but never replaces—meaningful engagement with English. Accordingly, the present study provides further evidence that the educational value of L1 lies not in its frequency of use, but in its selective and pedagogically informed application.

Learner Agency in Judging Appropriate First-Language Use

The concept of learner agency provides an important lens through which to interpret the findings of the present study. Within applied linguistics, learner agency refers to learners' capacity to make informed decisions, exercise choice and actively shape their own learning experiences rather than simply responding to instructional practices (Benson, 2013, 2017). More recent scholarship further emphasises that agency is co-constructed through learners' interactions with teachers, peers and learning environments, positioning learners as active participants in negotiating classroom practices rather than passive recipients of pedagogical decisions ((Tao & Gao, 2026). Viewed from this perspective, the findings suggest that participants were not merely expressing preferences regarding first-language (L1) use but were demonstrating their capacity to evaluate its pedagogical value within adult ESOL classrooms.

The findings indicate that adult ESOL learners consistently exercised learner agency by making informed judgements about the appropriate role of strategic first-language use in English language learning. Rather than expressing unconditional support for or opposition to L1 use, participants distinguished between situations in which first-language support facilitated learning and those in which excessive reliance on L1 could restrict opportunities for meaningful engagement with English. They evaluated the appropriateness of L1 according to pedagogical purpose, learner proficiency and communicative need, demonstrating a nuanced understanding of how multilingual resources could support language learning while maintaining English as the principal language of classroom communication.

These findings extend previous research by foregrounding learners' own pedagogical reasoning. Much of the literature examining first-language use has focused primarily on teachers' beliefs, instructional decision-making and classroom practices (Cook, 2001; Macaro, 2009; Hall & Cook, 2012), while comparatively less attention has been given to how learners themselves evaluate multilingual pedagogies. The present findings demonstrate that adult ESOL learners possess well-developed perspectives concerning when first-language support is appropriate, who should use it and how its role should evolve as English proficiency develops. Rather than viewing L1 as either inherently beneficial or detrimental, participants consistently advocated a balanced approach in which selective first-language support complemented, rather than replaced, English language learning.

Recent scholarship has increasingly recognised learner agency as a central component of multilingual pedagogy. Tao and Gao's, 2026 review argues that learner agency is fundamental to understanding language learning because learners actively interpret, negotiate and respond to classroom practices rather than simply accepting teachers' instructional decisions. Similarly, Morriss (2024) argues that translanguaging practices within adult ESOL classrooms create opportunities for learners to exercise agency by drawing strategically upon their multilingual repertoires to support learning and participation. These perspectives align closely with the present findings, suggesting that strategic first-language use should be understood not only as a pedagogical resource but also as a context in which learners actively evaluate and regulate their own language learning.

The present study contributes to this emerging perspective by demonstrating that learner agency was evident not only in participants' language learning behaviours but also in their pedagogical reasoning. Participants distinguished between teacher and peer use of L1, supported reducing first-language support as proficiency increased, and consistently argued that English should remain the principal language of classroom communication. In doing so, they demonstrated the capacity to make informed pedagogical judgements concerning the appropriate use of multilingual resources rather than simply expressing positive attitudes towards first-language use. This learner-centred perspective extends existing research by illustrating that adult ESOL learners are capable of critically evaluating classroom language practices according to learning effectiveness rather than ideological preference.

Overall, the discussion indicates that learner agency represents an important, yet comparatively underexplored, dimension of multilingual pedagogy within adult ESOL education. Rather than positioning learners solely as recipients of teachers' instructional decisions, the present study demonstrates that adult learners actively negotiate, evaluate and regulate the role of strategic first-language use throughout the language learning process. Recognising learners as active partners in

decisions concerning classroom language use therefore offers a more collaborative and context-sensitive perspective on multilingual pedagogy while contributing further evidence that effective strategic first-language use depends upon shared pedagogical understanding between teachers and learners.

Strategic First-Language Use as a Dynamic Pedagogical Resource

The findings suggest that strategic first-language (L1) use should be understood as a dynamic pedagogical resource whose educational value changes according to learners' developing English proficiency, instructional objectives and communicative needs. Rather than supporting either English-only instruction or unrestricted multilingual practices, participants consistently argued that first-language support should evolve alongside learners' language development. Strategic L1 use was perceived as particularly valuable during the earlier stages of learning, when it facilitated comprehension, reduced linguistic uncertainty and supported participation. However, participants also emphasised that reliance on the first language should gradually diminish as learners became increasingly capable of communicating independently in English. These findings indicate that learners viewed strategic L1 use as a temporary instructional scaffold rather than a permanent feature of classroom practice.

This interpretation is broadly consistent with foundational research recognising the pedagogical value of learners' first language. Cook (2001) argued that the first language constitutes an important cognitive resource for second-language learning, while Cummins' (2007) interdependence hypothesis highlights how existing linguistic knowledge can support additional language development. Similarly, Macaro (2009) maintained that decisions concerning L1 use should be determined by pedagogical purpose rather than ideological commitment to English-only instruction. Although these perspectives established the legitimacy of strategic first-language use, they paid comparatively less attention to how learners themselves perceived its role changing across different stages of language development.

Recent scholarship increasingly advocates flexible and context-responsive multilingual pedagogies. Systematic reviews by Prilutskaya (2021), Kim and Weng (2022), and Huang and Chalmers (2023) conclude that pedagogical translanguaging is most effective when implemented strategically according to learner needs, instructional aims and classroom context rather than through predetermined language policies. Similarly, recent research on multilingual education argues that effective language teaching requires adaptive pedagogical decision-making that recognises learners' evolving linguistic resources instead of viewing classroom language use as a fixed choice between English-only and multilingual approaches. Viewed collectively, this body of research supports a developmental understanding of multilingual pedagogy that aligns closely with participants' perspectives in the present study.

The findings extend this literature by demonstrating that adult ESOL learners themselves conceptualised strategic first-language use as a developmental process. Participants consistently described L1 support as most valuable during the earlier stages of English language learning, particularly for supporting comprehension, vocabulary development and confidence. As their proficiency increased, however, learners believed that first-language support should become progressively more selective, allowing English to assume an increasingly central role in classroom

communication. Rather than advocating fixed rules governing language choice, participants consistently emphasised the importance of adapting first-language support to learners' changing educational needs.

Consequently, the present study proposes a learner-informed developmental perspective on strategic first-language use within adult ESOL classrooms. This perspective suggests that the pedagogical value of L1 cannot be understood independently of learners' stage of development, learning objectives and communicative competence. Instead, strategic first-language use should be viewed as a flexible instructional resource whose role evolves as learners become increasingly independent users of English. Such an interpretation moves beyond binary debates concerning whether first-language use should occur in English language classrooms and instead emphasises how its role should change throughout the language learning process.

Based on these findings, Figure 1 summarises participants' perceptions of how the role of strategic first-language use changes as English proficiency develops. The figure is intended as a conceptual representation of participants' views rather than a prescriptive framework for classroom practice.

Stage of English Development	Perceived Role of Strategic L1
Beginning proficiency	Greater strategic support for comprehension, vocabulary learning, confidence and reducing linguistic uncertainty
Developing proficiency	Selective support for clarification, grammar explanation and complex concepts while increasing English use
Higher proficiency	Predominantly English with occasional strategic L1 support where pedagogically justified
Independent English use	English functions as the principal language of communication with minimal reliance on L1

Figure 1. Participants' Perceived Developmental Role of Strategic First-Language Use

Overall, the evidence suggests that the central issue for multilingual pedagogy is not whether strategic first-language use should occur, but how its pedagogical role should evolve as learners' linguistic competence develops. This learner-informed developmental perspective contributes to current discussions by highlighting flexibility, responsiveness and pedagogical judgement as central principles underpinning effective strategic first-language use in adult ESOL education.

Discussion Summary

This chapter interpreted the findings in relation to existing research on strategic first-language (L1) use, multilingual pedagogy and learner agency. The discussion demonstrated that adult ESOL learners perceived strategic first-language use as a valuable pedagogical resource when employed selectively to support English language learning. It further highlighted learners' capacity to make informed

judgements about appropriate classroom language use and proposed a learner-informed developmental perspective in which the role of strategic L1 evolves alongside increasing English proficiency. Collectively, these contributions extend current understanding of multilingual pedagogy within adult ESOL education and provide the foundation for the practical implications presented in the following section.

Implications to Research and Practice

The findings have several implications for research and practice within adult ESOL education. By demonstrating that learners perceive strategic first-language (L1) use as a purposeful pedagogical resource rather than an instructional obstacle, the study provides recommendations for classroom practice, teacher education, institutional language policy and future research. These implications are grounded in participants' perspectives and the wider literature on multilingual pedagogy, highlighting the importance of context-sensitive and pedagogically informed approaches to classroom language use.

Implications for ESOL Teachers

For classroom practitioners, the findings reinforce the importance of viewing learners' first languages as pedagogical resources rather than obstacles to English language development. Participants consistently described strategic L1 use as supporting comprehension, reducing linguistic uncertainty and encouraging classroom participation, particularly during the earlier stages of language learning. This interpretation aligns with previous research demonstrating that judicious first-language use can facilitate comprehension and scaffold second-language learning without diminishing learners' exposure to English (Cook, 2001; Hall & Cook, 2012; Macaro, 2009). More recent systematic reviews similarly conclude that carefully managed pedagogical translanguaging can enhance learner engagement, participation and understanding when implemented for clearly defined instructional purposes rather than as routine classroom practice (Prilutskaya, 2021; Kim & Weng, 2022; Huang & Chalmers, 2023).

Importantly, the findings do not support indiscriminate first-language use. Instead, participants consistently argued that strategic L1 support should function as a temporary instructional scaffold that facilitates learning while preserving meaningful opportunities for communication in English. Teachers should therefore exercise professional judgement when determining whether first-language support is likely to enhance learning, considering factors such as learners' proficiency, lesson objectives, task complexity and communicative purpose. Such an approach reflects a flexible and responsive pedagogy rather than adherence to predetermined language policies.

Implications for Teacher Education and Professional Development

The findings also have implications for teacher education and continuing professional development. Rather than presenting first-language use as a binary choice between English-only instruction and unrestricted multilingual practices, teacher education programmes should encourage teachers to develop the pedagogical judgement required to determine when, why and how strategic first-language support is most likely to facilitate learning. This recommendation reflects Macaro's (2009) argument

that language choice should be informed by pedagogical purpose rather than ideology and is consistent with recent scholarship advocating adaptive multilingual pedagogies that respond to learner characteristics, instructional objectives and classroom context (Kim & Weng, 2022; Huang & Chalmers, 2023).

Professional development should also encourage teachers to recognise learners as active participants in decisions concerning classroom language use. As demonstrated in the present study, participants exercised considerable agency in evaluating the educational value of strategic L1 use according to learning effectiveness rather than ideological preference. Creating opportunities for teachers to engage with learners' perspectives when making decisions about classroom language use may therefore contribute to more collaborative, responsive and context-sensitive multilingual classroom practices.

Implications for Institutional Language Policy

At an institutional level, the findings question the suitability of rigid English-only policies that provide limited flexibility for responding to learners' educational needs. Participants consistently viewed selective first-language support as beneficial when employed strategically to overcome learning difficulties while maintaining English as the primary language of instruction. These findings support growing recognition that multilingualism represents an educational resource rather than a barrier to second-language learning (Hall & Cook, 2012; Prilutskaya, 2021; Morriss, 2024).

Rather than prescribing inflexible rules governing classroom language use, institutional policies should provide teachers with the professional autonomy to exercise informed pedagogical judgement while maintaining clear expectations regarding the central role of English within adult ESOL classrooms. Such an approach acknowledges the complexity of multilingual learning environments and enables teachers to respond appropriately to learners' changing linguistic and educational needs.

Overall, these implications reinforce the view that strategic first-language use should be understood as a flexible pedagogical resource whose effectiveness depends upon context, learner characteristics and informed professional judgement rather than predetermined language policies. The evidence presented in this study supports the growing consensus that multilingual pedagogy is most effective when language choices are guided by pedagogical purpose, learner development and communicative need rather than ideological commitment to either English-only instruction or unrestricted multilingual practices (Cook, 2001; Hall & Cook, 2012; Huang & Chalmers, 2023). Consequently, the present study advocates a principled and context-sensitive approach in which strategic first-language use complements—but never replaces—meaningful engagement with English while supporting adult learners' language development.

CONCLUSION

This study explored adult ESOL learners' perceptions of strategic first-language (L1) use within a Further Education college in the United Kingdom. Although the role of learners' first language has been widely debated within applied linguistics and multilingual pedagogy, much of the existing literature has focused on teachers' beliefs, classroom practices and instructional approaches. Comparatively less attention has been devoted to how adult ESOL learners themselves evaluate the

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK

role of strategic first-language use in supporting English language learning. By foregrounding learners' perspectives, this study sought to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how multilingual resources are perceived and negotiated within adult ESOL classrooms.

The findings demonstrate that participants viewed strategic first-language use as a valuable pedagogical resource when employed selectively and purposefully to support English language learning. Rather than advocating either English-only instruction or unrestricted multilingual practices, learners consistently supported a balanced approach in which strategic L1 use enhanced comprehension, facilitated language learning and encouraged classroom participation while maintaining English as the principal language of communication. Participants also demonstrated considerable learner agency by making informed judgements concerning when, why and by whom first-language support should be used. Furthermore, they consistently argued that the role of strategic L1 should evolve alongside learners' developing English proficiency, highlighting its function as a temporary instructional scaffold rather than a permanent feature of classroom practice.

The study makes four principal contributions to the growing body of research on multilingual pedagogy. First, it provides further evidence that strategic first-language use is best understood as a pedagogical resource whose effectiveness depends upon purposeful, context-sensitive implementation rather than fixed language policies. Second, it extends existing literature by demonstrating that adult ESOL learners are active evaluators of classroom language practices who exercise pedagogical agency in judging the appropriateness of first-language support. Third, the findings support a learner-informed developmental perspective in which the educational role of strategic first-language use evolves alongside learners' English proficiency, suggesting that multilingual support should respond to learners' changing needs rather than be applied uniformly across all stages of language learning. Finally, by examining learner perspectives within an adult ESOL Further Education context in the United Kingdom, the study contributes evidence from an educational setting that remains comparatively underrepresented within the literature.

Ultimately, the study suggests that the long-standing debate surrounding first-language use in adult ESOL education should move beyond asking whether learners' first language should be used. A more productive question concerns how, when and for what pedagogical purposes strategic first-language support can facilitate English language development. Viewed from this perspective, learners' first languages are neither obstacles to be eliminated nor substitutes for English, but valuable multilingual resources that can enhance learning when employed selectively, purposefully and responsively.

Rather than asking whether first-language use belongs in adult ESOL classrooms, educators and researchers should instead consider how strategic first-language support can be employed purposefully, responsively and developmentally to facilitate English language learning. In this sense, the educational value of learners' first language lies not in how frequently it is used, but in how thoughtfully and pedagogically it is used to support learners' developing competence, confidence and participation in English. It is hoped that this study will contribute to ongoing discussions of multilingual pedagogy while encouraging future research that continues to place learners' voices at the centre of decisions concerning classroom language use.

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK

Like all qualitative research, this study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. The research was conducted with a small sample of adult ESOL learners from a single Further Education college and relied primarily on interview data exploring learners' perceptions rather than classroom observations. Nevertheless, these limitations do not diminish the value of the study; rather, they provide important opportunities for future research to extend and refine understanding of strategic first-language use across a wider range of adult ESOL contexts.

Future Research

The findings of this study identify several directions for future research that could extend current understanding of strategic first-language (L1) use within adult ESOL education. Although the present study provides valuable insights into learners' perceptions within a UK Further Education context, further investigation is needed to examine whether similar patterns emerge across different educational settings, learner populations and multilingual learning environments.

One important avenue for future research concerns the developmental perspective proposed in this study. Longitudinal research could investigate how learners' perceptions of strategic first-language use evolve as English proficiency develops, providing empirical evidence to examine how the pedagogical role of L1 changes over time. Such studies would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how multilingual support can be adapted to learners' changing linguistic needs throughout the language learning process.

Future research would also benefit from adopting mixed-methods designs that combine learner interviews with classroom observations, teacher interviews and stimulated recall techniques. Such methodological triangulation would enable researchers to compare learners' reported perceptions with actual classroom practices while providing a more comprehensive understanding of how strategic first-language use is negotiated by teachers and learners during authentic classroom interaction.

Further studies should also explore strategic first-language use across a wider range of adult ESOL contexts. Comparative research involving multiple Further Education colleges, community-based ESOL programmes and adult education providers would help determine the transferability of the present findings across different institutional and sociolinguistic settings. Similarly, research involving learners from diverse linguistic, cultural and educational backgrounds would provide a broader understanding of how multilingual resources are perceived and utilised across increasingly heterogeneous adult ESOL populations.

Finally, future research should investigate the role of strategic first-language use within online and blended ESOL learning environments, where multilingual interaction presents new pedagogical opportunities and challenges. Additional intervention studies examining the impact of different approaches to strategic L1 use on learner engagement, language development and classroom participation would further strengthen the evidence base informing multilingual pedagogy. Together, these research directions would contribute to a deeper understanding of how strategic first-language use can most effectively support adult English language learning while informing evidence-based teaching, teacher education and language policy.

References

- Alshammari, M. M. (2011). The use of the mother tongue in Saudi EFL classrooms. *Journal of International Education Research*, 7(4), 95–102. <https://doi.org/10.19030/jier.v7i4.6055>
- Antony, S., Ramnath, R., & Ellikkal, A. (2024). Examining students' perspectives on pedagogical translanguaging in the multilingual classroom context. *IAFOR Journal of Education*, 12(1), 199–223.
- Antón, M., & DiCamilla, F. J. (1999). Socio-cognitive functions of L1 collaborative interaction in the L2 classroom. *The Modern Language Journal*, 83(2), 233–247.
- Atkinson, D. (1987). The mother tongue in the classroom: A neglected resource? *ELT Journal*, 41(4), 241–247.
- Baynham, M. (2006). Agency and contingency in the language learning of refugees and asylum seekers. *Linguistics and Education*, 17(1), 24–39. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2006.08.008>
- Baynham, M., & Simpson, J. (2010). Onwards and upwards: Space, placement, and liminality in adult ESOL classes. *TESOL Quarterly*, 44(3), 420–440. <https://doi.org/10.5054/tq.2010.226852>
- Benson, P. (2013). Learner autonomy. *TESOL Quarterly*, 47(4), 839–843. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.134>
- Benson, P. (2017). Language learner autonomy. In S. Loewen & M. Sato (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of instructed second language acquisition* (pp. 286–300). Routledge.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. SAGE.
- Brooks-Lewis, K. A. (2009). Adult learners' perceptions of the incorporation of their L1 in foreign language teaching and learning. *Applied Linguistics*, 30(2), 216–235.
- Cook, V. (2001). Using the first language in the classroom. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 57(3), 402–423. <https://doi.org/10.3138/cmlr.57.3.402>
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE.
- Criado, R., & González-Romero, P. (2023). Exploring first language use in non-formal foreign language education: A mixed-method approach. *Arab World English Journal*, 14(4), 19–45. <https://doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol14no4.2>
- Cummins, J. (2007). Rethinking monolingual instructional strategies in multilingual classrooms. *Canadian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 10(2), 221–240.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics: Quantitative, qualitative and mixed methodologies*. Oxford University Press.
- Flick, U. (2014). *An introduction to qualitative research* (5th ed.). SAGE.
- Hall, G., & Cook, G. (2012). Own-language use in language teaching and learning: State of the art. *Language Teaching*, 45(3), 271–308. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444812000067>
- Hawa, S., Suryani, S., Susiani, R., Dauyah, E., & Majid, A. H. (2021). University students' perception toward the use of the mother tongue in the EFL classrooms. *Studies in English Language and Education*, 8(3), 1094–1110. <https://doi.org/10.24815/siele.v8i3.19870>
- Huang, H. Y. (2006). *CYUT students' attitudes and motivation toward native language and foreign language as a medium of instruction in English writing classes* (Unpublished master's thesis). Chaoyang University of Technology, Taichung, Taiwan.

- Huang, X., & Chalmers, H. (2023). Implementation and effects of pedagogical translanguaging in EFL classrooms: A systematic review. *Languages*, 8(3), Article 194. <https://doi.org/10.3390/languages8030194>
- Kim, G. J. Y., & Weng, Z. (2022). A systematic review on pedagogical translanguaging in TESOL. *TESL-EJ*, 26(3). <https://doi.org/10.55593/ej.26103a4>
- Kim, H.-S., & Choi, U.-Y. (2024). Learner perceptions of L1 use in EFL settings: Strategic insights from a Korean university study. *Modern English Education*, 25, 259–275.
- Kim, Y., & Petraki, E. (2009). Students' and teachers' use of and attitudes to L1 in the EFL classroom. *Asian EFL Journal*, 11(4), 58–89.
- Kovačić, A., & Kirinić, V. (2011). To use or not to use: First language in tertiary instruction of English as a foreign language. In *Proceedings of the 1st International Conference on Foreign Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics* (Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina).
- Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2015). *InterViews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing* (3rd ed.). SAGE.
- Lantolf, J. P. (Ed.). (2000). *Sociocultural theory and second language learning*. Oxford University Press.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. SAGE.
- Macaro, E. (2009). Teacher use of codeswitching in the L2 classroom: Exploring "optimal" use. In M. Turnbull & J. Dailey-O'Cain (Eds.), *First language use in second and foreign language learning* (pp. 35–49). Multilingual Matters.
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (2016). *Designing qualitative research* (6th ed.). SAGE.
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Molway, L., Arcos, M., & Macaro, E. (2022). Language teachers' reported first and second language use: A comparative contextualized study of England and Spain. *Language Teaching Research*, 26(4), 642–670. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168820913978>
- Morriss, K. (2024). Ethical dilemmas of translanguaging pedagogy in L2 and basic literacy education for adults: Social justice and ethics of care. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 27, 372–389. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457823.2024.2390946>
- Nazary, M. (2008). The role of L1 in L2 acquisition: Attitudes of Iranian university students. *Novitas-ROYAL*, 2(2), 138–153.
- Norton, B. (2013). *Identity and language learning: Extending the conversation* (2nd ed.). Multilingual Matters.
- Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4th ed.). SAGE.
- Prilutskaya, M. (2021). Examining pedagogical translanguaging: A systematic review of the literature. *Languages*, 6(4), Article 180. <https://doi.org/10.3390/languages6040180>
- Prodromou, L. (2002). The role of the mother tongue in the classroom. *IATEFL Issues*, 169, 6–8.
- Rahmany, A. B., Hashimi, S. A., Tayid, N. A., & Sohail, F. R. (2025). EFL learners' attitudes towards the use of L1 in EFL classrooms. *Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 2(4). <https://doi.org/10.62810/jssh.v2i4.92>

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK

- Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. S. (2001). *Approaches and methods in language teaching* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Schweers, C. W., Jr. (1999). Using L1 in the L2 classroom. *English Teaching Forum*, 37(2), 6–13.
- Storch, N., & Aldosari, A. (2010). Learners' use of first language (Arabic) in pair work in an EFL class. *Language Teaching Research*, 14(4), 355–375.
- Storch, N., & Wigglesworth, G. (2003). Is there a role for the use of the L1 in an L2 setting? *TESOL Quarterly*, 37(4), 760–770.
- Tang, J. (2002). Using L1 in the English classroom. *English Teaching Forum*, 40(1), 36–43.
- Tao, J., & Gao, X. (2026). Learner and teacher agency. *TESOL Quarterly*, 60(2), 586–611. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.70112>
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). SAGE.