

Language Choice in EFL Classrooms: A Case Study on Students' Perspective

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Abstract: *This study examines students' comprehension of lecturers' English (L2) and their preference as well as perception on the use of Vietnamese (L1) in EFL classes. Data was collected from questionnaires and focus-group interview with students. Data analysis revealed that students' English comprehension level was relatively low while the majority of them had a positive attitude toward lecturers' classroom English speaking. Meanwhile, findings show that a majority of students were motivated to listen to lecturers' English, which was found to be contradicted to the general belief about non-English major students' English learning motivation. The students perceived two main factors which influenced their comprehension of lecturers' English speaking and their learning motivation. Those factors are divided into lecturer-related and student-related. Among those, student-related factors including students' English vocabulary, strategies in listening to English, and listening practice were believed to be the most influential.*

Keywords: EFL classes, L1, L2, English learning motivation, lecturers' English speaking, comprehension of lecturers' English.

INTRODUCTION

In this age of globalisation, English is an important key to many attractive career opportunities and is indispensable for those wanting to work in international companies and/or to become global citizens. Thus, English is not only an essential tool for English majors but also for non-English major students. Compared with majors, non-English major students can have lower levels of intrinsic motivation and lack adequate preparedness for their learning (Ngo et al., 2017), which may lead to their lack of interest during lessons. Hence, the enhancement of English teaching efficiency in non-English major classes seems to be harder.

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I started my English teaching career at Korea-Vietnam Friendship Information Technology College, a public college in Danang city, in 2009. All the students at my college were non-English majors and their admission levels of English were very low because they did not have to take English entrance tests to be admitted to the college. The majority of them had elementary level English, which was equivalent to level 1 and 2, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Hence, using English to teach them English was a big challenge for me. I remember experiencing students' different reactions, such as asking me to switch to Vietnamese or being shy with red faces when I spoke English to them. I then tried to talk to them to explain the benefits of using English to teach English and encouraged them to have more positive attitude towards my English speaking. During classes, I tried to combine English and Vietnamese and applied different strategies to help students better understand my English, which reduced my students' negative reactions. As a result, they gradually developed their listening skills and spoke a little English with correct pronunciation and more confidence. These practical experiences of teaching non-English majors, combined with the previous teacher professional training years, helped me realise that the language use in EFL classrooms play a really important role. However, little have I known about students' perspective on this issue.

LITERATURE REVIEW

How a second or foreign language can be taught effectively seems to be the most commonly asked question for L2/FL educators. Among the factors that decide the success of the teaching process, classroom language choice is of great importance, which is explored in greater detail in this section.

L1 Use in the L2/FL Classroom

L1 use is prevalent in language classrooms where teachers and learners share the same first language. Recent theories and research in SLA have suggested that there are two sides to the use of L1 in an L2 classroom, suggesting that the decision of language choice is not just black and white. This section examines both the negative and positive roles of the L1 in L2/FL teaching. It also presents relevant findings of empirical studies.

Quantity of L2/FL Teachers' L1 Use. Studies examining the quantity of L1 used by L2/FL teachers have shown two main trends. The first group of research findings reveal a relatively small percentage of L1 use. For example, De la Campa and Nassaji (2009) investigated how much and when teachers used L1 in two German-as-a-foreign-language classes and found an average L1 use of only 11.3%. Song and Andrews (2009) found that the four Chinese English teachers in their study used from 10.5% to 32.2%

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L1 in their English teaching. Bozorgian and Fallahpour (2015) investigated the amount and purposes of L1 use in EFL classrooms in Iran and their results show that the teachers used L1 very little, from 3.14% to the maximum of 11.33%. Taşçı and Aksu Atac (2020), however, found Turkish EFL teachers used a higher amount of L1 in their classes, ranging from 21 to 30% of all classroom instructions.

The second group showed substantial variations across teachers, even within similar teaching contexts. Liu et al. (2004) examined the percentage of L1 and target language words in the lessons of thirteen high-school teachers of English in South Korea and found the teachers' L1 took up from 10 to 90 percent of the total language use. Similarly, Al-Ghafri et al. (2019) found that Omani English language teachers used their learners' L1 quite flexibly, from a minimum of 28.1% to a maximum of 71.9%, in L2 classrooms. Aly's (2020) investigation of learners' and teachers' attitudes toward using L1 in classes focused on learners of Arabic and found a rate of 67.4% L1 used by teachers.

The above-mentioned research has demonstrated the varying levels of L1 use in different language learning settings. The findings suggest a preference among EFL teachers to combine L1 and L2 in the classroom.

Arguments for the Negative Role of the L1 in L2/FL Education. In examining the role of the L1 in L2 learning, it is necessary to look back at some early theories in SLA. Behaviourists believed that “the main impediment to learning was interference from prior knowledge” (Ellis, 1994, p. 299). This can demonstrate that the bigger the differences between L1 and L2, the stronger L1's negative interference can be, as in the case of Vietnamese and English, which are distinguished from each other in basically all areas of linguistics. Similar to behaviourism, interaction hypothesis posits that using the L1 for classroom interaction can be “depriving the students of the only true experience of the L2 that they may ever encounter” (Cook, 2001, p. 409). Combining those views, it seems that L1 may cause negative interference in L2 instruction and interaction.

There have been empirical studies which evidenced that students' L1 may have negative effects on L2 acquisition. The study of Shamsudin et al. (2013) revealed that L1 interference led to collocational errors by Iranian EFL learners in both writing and speaking tests. The negative interference of L1 is supported by Jaiprasong and Pongpairroj (2020) who investigated how L1 Thai learners produced English word stress. Results illustrated that those learners made the errors because they applied the word stress assignment rules of L1 into English while the rules are different from the two languages. Savran Celik and Aydin (2018) looked over the related literature and concluded that excessive use of L1 automatically reduces learners' productivity and awareness, keeping learners' focus away from learning English. They added that L1

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use prevents interaction and metalinguistic competence and thus reduces the effectiveness and richness of the language learning environment.

As can be seen, L1 can have a negative influence on L2/FL learning and teaching. In the Vietnamese EFL teaching context in particular, the negative interference of L1 can be caused by the difference between the two language systems, especially phonetic, typological, and cross-cultural differences (Giang, 2007).

Arguments for the Positive Role of the L1 in L2/FL Education. As discussed previously, L1 was regarded by the early behaviourist learning theory as having a negative effect on L2 learning due to the errors resulting from negative L1 transfer. However, behaviourists also believe that L1 transfer can also have positive effects on L2 learning. For example, Odlin (1989) examined L1 transfer in terms of semantics, phonology, writing systems, and syntax and asserted that much of L1 influence can be very helpful, especially when there are only a few differences between L1 and the target language. Sociocultural theory implies that L2 learning is viewed as a mediated process in which “L1 plays a key role in helping learners to mediate each other” (Lantolf, 2000, p. 87). Also, learners’ mother language can be regarded as a crucial scaffolding support tool (Vygotsky, 1978).

Recent research and studies have confirmed the multi-functionality of L1 use by teachers in L2/FL classrooms. Firstly, teachers commonly use L1 for pedagogical purposes such as eliciting answers, explaining meaning, answering students’ questions, giving feedback, and classroom management (e.g. Ma, 2019; Nakatsukasa & Loewen, 2015; Nukuto, 2017). Research has suggested that the use of students’ L1 as a consciousness-raising tool for the teaching of grammar is effective for beginners (Alijani & Barjesteh, 2018; Arshad et al., 2015). Secondly, teachers utilise L1 to create and enhance interpersonal relationships and express emotions with students by making jokes, or offering students praise and encouragement (Caldwell-Harris, 2014). Teachers’ L1 has been shown to be a source of humour which could minimise learners’ tension and increase the learners’ interactional competence in the classroom (Jawhar, 2018).

Research has also found positive perceptions and attitudes of L2 students and teachers toward L1 use. Results revealed that learners’ L2 competency affects their degree of agreement toward the use of L1. For example, while the higher-level students expressed a negative view of L1 use within a tertiary learning context, lower level proficiency participants had a positive attitude (Aly, 2020; Shariati, 2019). In general, researchers (e.g. Anggrahini, 2019) have reported that students supported minimal use of L1 in EFL classrooms.

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METHODOLOGY

The Two Research Sites

This study was conducted in two public tertiary colleges in Da Nang city (Vietnam) where students undertake 2.5-3.5-year college degrees and where English is taught as a non-major subject. Students from college A were enrolled in two main training courses. The first group were trained to become programmers, graphic/web designers, and architects. The other group were taught to work in the commerce sectors. The students in college B were trained to work in tourism or catering-service enterprises, which normally have high requirements of English skills, especially communicative English.

Participants

The student participants were mostly studying in their first and second years and in different training majors. They came from diverse geographical backgrounds, including remote, highland, and the city areas. This created differences in the English language backgrounds and levels among students because in most remote or highland regions pupils begin to learn English 3-4 years later than those in big cities. Also, students from cities normally have better opportunities to practice and learn English outside classes; hence, their English levels could be much higher. Overall, the classes tend to reflect a wide range of English language proficiencies. The students' English levels were divided into beginning, lower-intermediate, and intermediate proficiency. Most of the students were at very basic English proficiency levels (beginning and lower-intermediate).

Instruments for Data Collection

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was constructed to collect information on the factors that encouraged and discouraged students' understanding of their lecturers' English speaking in classrooms. It was divided into three main sections, beginning with the personal and English learning background questions about gender, study majors, and years of learning English. The next part included six questions asking for general information such as their self-evaluation of their English competency, their satisfaction, difficulty, and motivation in relation to their lecturers' English speaking. These questions were mostly presented in a multiple-choice format and were based on the 5-point-Likert scale framework by Wade (2006). The last part had six questions focusing on students' perceptions of what afforded and hindered their comprehension of lecturers' English speaking, requiring students to label from 1 to 5 (*1=Not a barrier to 5=Extreme barrier*). A number of questions in the student questionnaire had open-ended options which "make a truer assessment of what the respondents really believe, and opening for unexpected or unanticipated answers" (Li et al., 2006, p. 438).

Focus group interview

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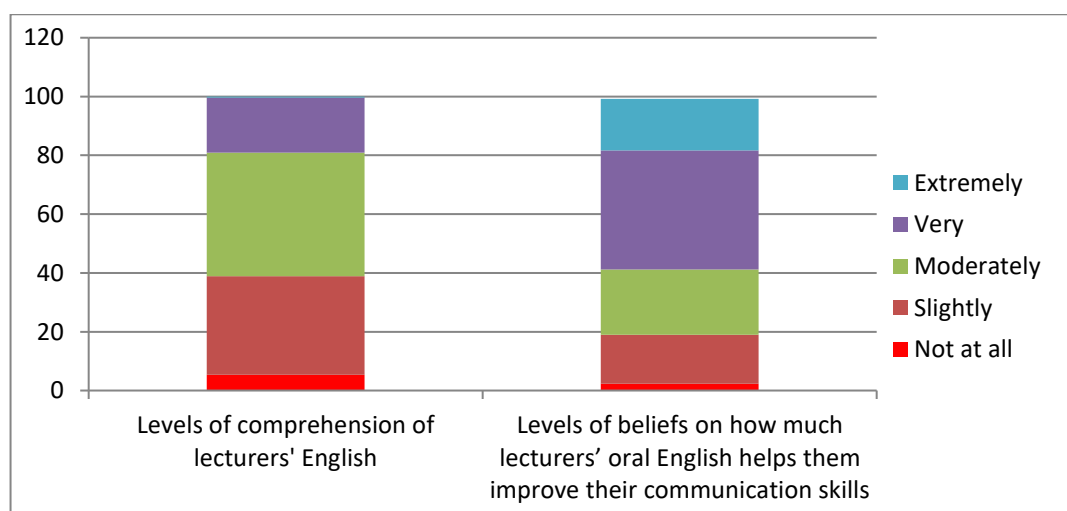
Focus group interview was conducted with student participants because the “focus group methodology is useful in exploring what people think, how and why they think they way they do without pressuring them into making decisions” (Liamputtong, 2011, p. 5). The focus group approach involves students discussing questions with each other, with me merely acting as the facilitator, which is likely to be less intimidating than one-on-one interviews with a person of perceived higher power. As a result, students were less inhibited and spoke honestly, naturally, and confidently. As for the number of participants in each group, Denscombe (2007) suggests between six and nine participants because this “number allows for a fair range of opinions and experiences among the participants” (p. 181). Liamputtong (2011) considers that an ideal focus group should have between four and ten members. Following their ideas, I decided to aim to have six students in each focus group and one focus group for students of each lecturer sourced from two classes. Students were invited and chosen based on the selection survey that was included at the end of the student questionnaires. Thus, a total of 30 students were invited to take part in five focus groups.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Students’ Comprehension Levels, Perceptions on Learning Improvement, and Motivation to Listen to Lecturers’ English

This section discusses the answers from 257 participants to the survey and focus group interview questions: “Overall, how much do you understand your lecturers’ English speaking?” and: “Overall, to what extent do you think your lecturers’ spoken English in class helps you to improve your communication skills?”. The participants’ answers are illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1



How Much do Students Understand Lecturers’ English Speaking and How Much does It Help Them Improve Communication Skills?

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The number of students who chose *Not at all* and *Slightly* regarding the extent to which they understood lecturers' English accounted for 38.9%, about twice as many as those labelling their comprehension level as *Very* and *Extremely*, with 19.1%. This result gives further support to the finding from the lecturer and student interview data that students' English comprehension level was relatively low.

Although a large number of students had difficulties understanding their lecturers' English, they still strongly believed that their lecturers' use of English in classroom would help them improve their communication skills. Specifically, 58.4% students thought that lecturers' English speaking helped them improve their communication skills *really* and *extremely*, which was three times as many as those who chose the *Not at all* and *Slightly* options (19.3%). This demonstrates that the majority of students have a positive attitude toward lecturers' classroom English speaking.

Table 1 summarises the results for the student survey: “Do you feel motivated, demotivated, or neutral when listening to your lecturers speaking English in class?”.

Table 1

		No	%
Valid	Motivated	163	63.4
	Demotivated	40	15.6
	Neutral	47	18.3
	Total	250	97.3
Missing	Response	7	2.7
Total		257	100

Student Perceptions by Motivation Levels When Listening to Lecturers Speaking English in Class

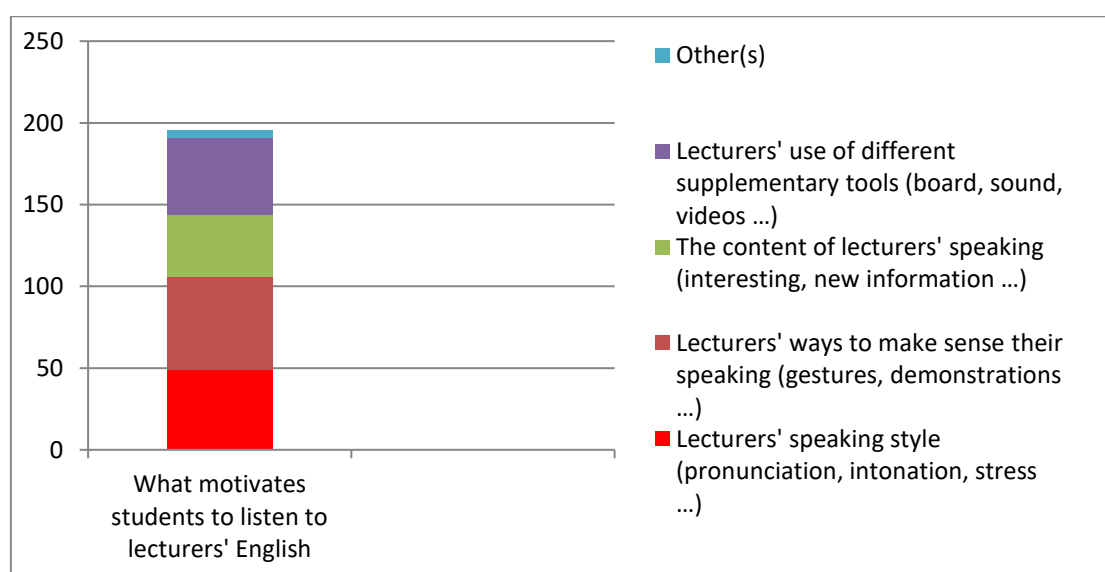
There are four times as many students who said they were motivated to listen to lecturers' speaking English in class as those who were demotivated. This shows that a majority of students were motivated to listen to lecturers' English, which seems to conflict with the lecturers' perceptions that their students might be stressed and shocked when they try to use mostly English in non-English major classes.

The next section presents the two main factors which influenced non-English major students' comprehension of lecturers' spoken English and their learning motivation. Those are grouped into lecture-related and student-related.

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Lecturer-Related Factors

Speech-Performance Aspects. With regard to what actually motivated students to listen to lecturers' English, the reasons collected from student questionnaire responses were shown in the figure below:

Figure 2

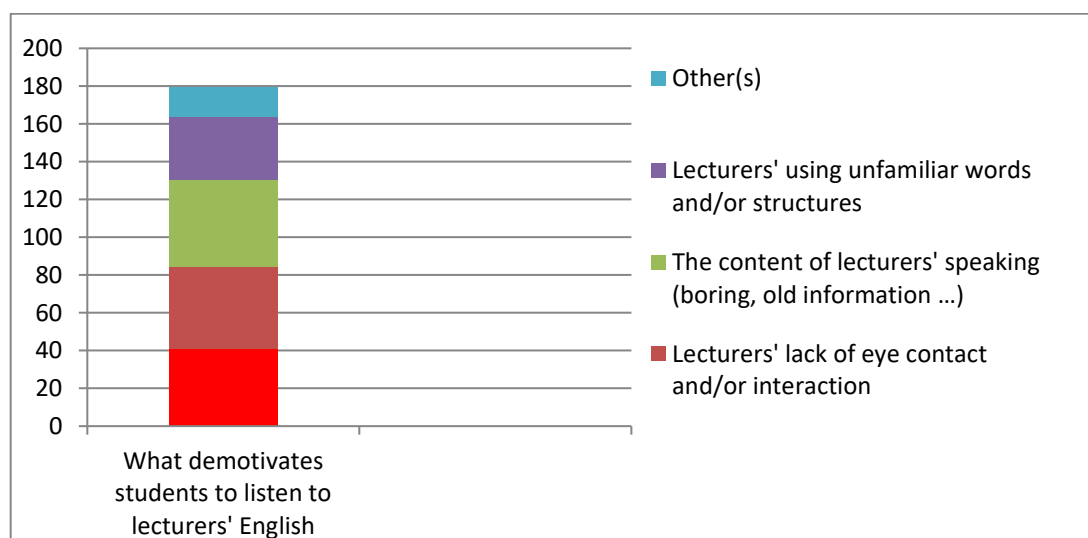


What Motivates Students to Listen to Lecturers' English?

As can be seen, *ways to make sense their speaking, speaking style, and the use of different supplementary tools* are the three main reasons why students felt motivated to listen to their lecturers' English speaking. The content of lecturers' speech is also a motive for students to be more willing to listen to it.

In contrast, the three most common responses to the question puts them off from listening to their lecturers' use of English in class were *the content of speaking, lack of eye contact and/or interaction, and speaking style*, as illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3



What Demotivates Students to Listen to Lecturers' English?

Combining the students' explanations of what motivates and demotivates them to listen to their lecturers' English speaking, we can see that aspects related to lecturers' speech performances had a strong effect on the students' willingness and motivation to listen to them. Specifically, lecturers' speaking styles, sense-making techniques, and the content of speech are found to be of concern for most of the students. Interview data further illustrate this:

I am not interested when they [lecturers] speak in normal styles. But when they speak with the up and down tones, gestures, or expressions of their faces, I am more interested and can understand some parts. (IS3)

Lecturers' English speaking is not good enough, so I do not want to listen to them. I want to listen to a native speaker or someone on youtube channels ... I think the lecturers have Vietnamese English pronunciation. (TS9)

I like studying with foreign teachers because they have good and natural pronunciation styles; They make me more confident and provide more interactive situations. (TS8)

The three students' opinions show that some lecturers' English-speaking styles were not attractive to them because it did not sound natural. Those students frequently listened to native English speakers on entertainment or social media channels. Some of the respondents also have had opportunities to study with English L1 teachers who volunteered at their college, as was the case for students from school B, or in evening classes at English centres. Therefore, they have had experiences of what native English speech sounded like and viewed the non-native accents and speaking fluency of their Vietnamese lecturers in a negative light. Research (e.g. Ellen & Taverniers, 2011;

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development -UK (Tergujeff, 2013) has highlighted that many students still perceive native-like pronunciation as an ideal, which is the case for the students in this study.

The survey results also revealed that 46.2% of the students found the information that lecturers conveyed in English to be boring and out-dated, which hampered their motivation to engage in listening to it. This finding shows that the topics and content of lecturers' speech play an important part in enhancing students' willingness to listen. Students further highlighted this connection between relevance of content and willingness to listen in the interviews:

The content of lecturers' speech should be relevant or related to our fields of study so that we can apply them. This would give us reasons and motivation to listen to lecturers' English speech. (TS11)

Lecturers strictly follow the curriculum and textbooks; they do not relate the content to topics we are familiar with, which would help students understand the lessons better. If so, we will pay better attention to what they are saying. (TS14)

I really like it when she [lecturer] chit-chats with us about daily topics in English; it is very friendly and natural. It feels like we are communicating in a real-life, not teaching and learning scenario; and I often concentrate better then. (IS6)

Because the main type of motivation demonstrated by non-English major students is professional development motivation (Lobo & Gurney, 2014), it is not surprising that they expect their English learning to link to future jobs. In other words, how the current lessons can be applied when they enter their jobs is a constant question on their mind. Therefore, they are more motivated to listen to their lecturers' English speech if it contains something that is close or relevant to their majors or potential jobs. The students in this study considered the content of lecturers' speech as a main factor that determines whether they pay attention or not. Specifically, they expected lecturers' speech to feature content or ideas that were of interest to them or that they needed for future jobs. This point was also raised by Olive, who shared that teaching non-English major students like those in her school was challenging because there were two goals: linguistic competence and professional knowledge. She also stressed that lecturers should always link teaching content to students' fields of study to ensure they maintain their interests.

According to the questionnaire results, *the complexity of structures* and *amount and/or difficulty of vocabulary* in lecturers' speech were ranked the second and third biggest barrier to students' comprehension of lecturers' English. From the five-point scale categories, the choices *Somewhat strong barrier* and *Extreme barrier* constituted 44.3% and 39.7% of all answers respectively.

The demotivating impact of complex sentence structures and unknown vocabulary were also raised in the interviews:

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Lecturers should not use long, academic, or grammatically accurate sentences because those may demotivate low level students; instead, they should just use short utterances which convey the intended message or meaning. (TS4)

I think lecturers should use words which are more common and familiar in my daily life and communication. It would make me more interested in listening to them and it would be more useful because I can understand some parts of it. (IS3)

TS4 thought that lecturers did not necessarily need to use complex and academic structures because students did not need them. Short, focused, and simple phrases would make students understand them more easily. IS3 explained that the familiar and common words in lecturers' speech were necessary as they helped establish the context and provided clues for her to guess the meaning of the whole speech or at least part of it. She also believed that students would be more inclined to listen when lecturers' speech contained some words they already knew. As mentioned previously, non-English major students usually have low language competency and their motivation in learning English is practical. Hence, they normally require simple and common lexical and syntactic items in lecturers' English speaking which are just a bit above their zone of proximal development.

Sense of Humour.

The interview data also reveal that students appreciated their lecturers' sense of humour:

When a lecturer always smiles with students and has funny gestures or a sense of humour, students can learn more easily because it reduces their pressure. (IS6)

Lecturers should have more of a sense of humour when speaking English because we are not only bad at English listening but also have low motivation in learning. (TS12)

IS6 and TS12 thought that students would feel more motivated to learn English with a lecturer who was smiley and made jokes. They explained that, because their English competency and learning motivation was low, the use of humour by the lecturer would positively affect their learning attitude and listening motivation and make the L2 classroom setting less uncomfortable.

That teachers' humour plays a vital role in the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language (Hidayanti, 2019) is not a new concept. Humour has been found to facilitate the acquisition of vocabulary and help distinguish figurative from literal meaning (Muñoz-Basols, 2005). Moreover, Dörnyei (2001) also commented on the use of humour by L2 teachers to create a pleasant atmosphere in the classroom, saying that teachers can use humour so that students can feel the English classroom is not threatening, especially for non-major students who have a low learning motivation and a high level of shyness. In this study, lecturers' sense of humour was perceived by students to increase their willingness to listen to their lecturers' English speech.

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Ways of Providing Corrective Feedback. The interview data also show that the ways lecturers give feedback to students' errors can directly influence their learning motivation and English performances. This is exemplified by the following extracts:

And they [lecturers] should wait until we finish talking to correct our errors. Feedback to our errors is essential, but lecturers should be more patient and have more efficient techniques. Stopping me when I am talking makes me run out ideas and lack confidence to continue. (IS1)

I want my lecturers to correct phonetic and syntactic errors so that I can avoid making those mistakes again. But they should not interrupt me while I am talking; they can take notes and give corrective feedback when I finish speaking. (TS6)

Both IS1 and TS6 commented that lecturers correcting students' mistakes and errors was helpful for students' learning. This finding is supported by Lyster (2018), who proposed that providing feedback is more effective than withholding feedback in L2 instruction. In fact, most of the students in this study perceived the time and ways lecturers provide corrective feedback to them as important since they affect the students' confidence in L2 performances. The students expected their lecturers to provide feedback on their errors at the end of their speaking or at another suitable time so that the flow of their speech would not be interrupted. This would allow them to maintain their flow and keep speaking naturally and confidently in a supportive environment. Consequently, it seems that lecturers' patient and systematic ways of retrospective corrective feedback was perceived by the students to facilitate their learning.

Student-Related Factors

In addition to the above-mentioned factors, students were also aware that some barriers which influenced their motivation and comprehension of lecturers' English speaking were related to themselves. The following table synthesises the survey results:

Table 2

<i>Statements</i>	Not a barrier at all/ Somewhat of a barrier		Somewhat of a strong barrier/ An Extreme barrier	
	No	%	No	%
My lack of English vocabulary	25	10.2	164	67
My lack of strategies in listening to English	34	13.8	155	63
My lack of practicing listening to English	39	15.8	154	62.6
My lack of English structures	40	16.2	145	59
My lack of self confidence in listening to English	123	50.2	69	28.2
My lack of motivation in learning English	137	55.7	48	19.6
Other(s)	5	2	9	3.6

Student-Related Barriers to Students' Comprehension of Lecturers' English Speaking

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Compared with the synthesised data of other factors, it was found that the students thought the root of the problem to their difficulties in comprehending lecturers' spoken English could be found within themselves. The four most commonly identified hindrances resulting from the students were: *Lack of English vocabulary, strategies in listening to English, practicing listening to English, and English structures*. These findings were further supported by the interview data. For example, IS7 stated: "I think my friends were honest when they say they do not know most of the vocabulary, even basic ones, because their English foundations and levels are really low". TS3 shared that the most likely obstacle was that they did not have good English backgrounds, and this was blamed on the late start of learning English in some remote highland areas.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Although L1 can be useful in some situations, teachers' excessive use of L1 can reduce learners' L2 awareness and richness of the L2 learning environment (Savran Celik & Aydin, 2018). Such overuse of L1 can demotivate EFL students because they do not have many opportunities to have contact with English outside classrooms (Tsukamoto, 2012). This is further strengthened by the findings of this study which demonstrate that English should be used predominantly over Vietnamese in all cases. Firstly, the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach has been applied in most of the tertiary EFL classrooms in Vietnam; and the two research sites were making an effort to adopt CLT as a guiding teaching method. CLT advocates that learners should be presented with authentic listening materials and engaged in effective communication in meaningful real-life contexts in the target language. Secondly, a majority of interviewed students expected their lecturers to predominantly use L2. In this line, from students' perspectives and principles of CLT, English should be a dominant language of EFL classroom teaching and communication.

Based on these points, it is also implied that the overall amount of L2 should generally be more than L1 in EFL classes under all circumstances, although the question of how much L1 and L2 are used "can only be answered by careful consideration of that context by the teacher" (Kerr, 2019, p. 19).

Furthermore, there are some other ways, as recommended by some student participants, that lecturers can make their L2 more comprehensible using L2 (e.g. simplification) instead of using the L1. This implicitly states that a better consciousness and skills in using L2 communication strategies to make their L2 responses in L2 can help maximising L2 use in EFL classrooms.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Based on the literature review and research findings, it is clear that classroom language choice between L1 and L2, as an integral aspect of classroom oral discourse, deserves more attention from researchers.

Firstly, this study has also shown the complexities of non-English major students' perceptions on lecturers' classroom language use and choice. However, little is known to date about whether major and non-major students differ in their perceptions and preference, which could be a research topic within a large case investigation. Findings from those studies could yield more valuable insights that contribute to the current EFL classroom language literature.

Secondly, this research delves into the side of students themselves and little has been explored about lecturers' perceptions on the same issue. A combination between the two sides will help providing a more holistic picture and identifying any perceptual gaps between them. This could be a new EFL classroom language research orientation for other communication contexts and situations.

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