Using First Language as a Mediating Tool to Help Students Generate Ideas During Second Language Learning Activity

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ABSTRACT

Encouraging students' participation in discussions fosters idea exploration, yet low-proficient students face challenges in English-medium classrooms. Grounded in Sociocultural Theory, this paper investigates how students with limited English proficiency use Malay (L1) as a mediator for idea generation in English (L2) discussions. Through a one-hour L2 writing task involving three low-proficiency and three mixed-proficiency students, the study uncovers that L1 serves as a mediator when students feel their L2 speech fails to express their thoughts effectively, hindering their contribution of ideas. Furthermore, mixed-proficiency students seek L2 words for the writing task, while low-proficiency students define L2 terms in L1 to generate ideas. Engaging students in L1 is posited as means to enhance idea exploration in L2 activities.

Keywords: L1 mediation, idea generation, L2 group activity, low proficiency, Sociocultural theory

INTRODUCTION

In today's increasingly interconnected world, proficiency in a second language (L2) is considered a valuable skill, with English often serving as the global lingua franca. As education systems aim to prepare students for participation in a globalized economy, English-medium instruction has become prevalent, especially in non-native English-speaking countries (Macaro, 2020). However, this shift towards English-dominated learning environments presents challenges, particularly for students with limited proficiency. These students often struggle to fully engage in L2 learning activities, leading to disparities in academic achievement and classroom participation (Lewis & Brown, 2021).

A key issue in L2 education is how to effectively support students' idea generation and comprehension without compromising their language acquisition. Recent studies suggest that incorporating a student's first language (L1) can be a powerful tool in mediating understanding and facilitating cognitive engagement in L2 contexts (De la Fuente & Goldenberg, 2022). The use of L1 allows learners to explore complex concepts and express nuanced ideas, which they might find difficult to articulate in their developing L2 (Kim & Lantolf, 2018). This practice is increasingly recognized as a beneficial approach, challenging the traditional view that L1 use should be minimized in L2 classrooms to avoid interference (Hall & Cook, 2020).

The debate on the role of L1 in L2 learning environments is not merely academic; it reflects broader concerns about inclusivity and equity in education. When L2 instruction overlooks the role of L1, it risks marginalizing students with lower L2 proficiency and undermining their learning potential. By contrast, using L1 strategically as a mediating tool can empower students to generate ideas and actively participate in L2 activities, thus promoting a more inclusive and effective learning environment (Shin et al., 2020).

This study aims to explore the use of L1 as a mediating tool for idea generation among students during L2 learning activities, focusing specifically on how first language use can enhance the cognitive and communicative processes necessary for effective L2 acquisition. By examining the role of Malay as a

mediating language in English-medium group activities, this research seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse on optimizing L2 instructional practices.

The Perspective on Using Malay Language (L1) in English Language (L2) Learning

In Malaysia, the use of Malay as the first language (L1) to aid learning in English as a second language (L2) classrooms is a topic of considerable importance, given the country's linguistic diversity and educational policies. The Malaysian education system recognizes the challenges that come with English-medium instruction, especially for students who primarily speak Malay at home. As a result, the strategic use of Malay in English language learning has been acknowledged as a potential tool to bridge the gap between students' L1 and L2 competencies.

Recent studies and educational practices have highlighted the benefits of utilizing Malay as a mediating tool in English language classrooms. For instance, the use of L1 can help students better understand complex concepts, reduce anxiety, and increase participation in L2 learning activities (Inada, 2021). By providing explanations and clarifications in Malay, teachers can facilitate a deeper understanding of English content, making it more accessible to students with varying levels of English proficiency. This approach not only aids in comprehension but also promotes cognitive engagement, allowing students to express their ideas more freely and confidently.

Statistics from the Ministry of Education show that a significant proportion of students in Malaysian schools are more comfortable using Malay as their primary language of communication. This linguistic preference underscores the importance of incorporating L1 in L2 learning environments to support effective learning outcomes (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2024). The integration of Malay in English language instruction aligns with the broader educational goals of fostering bilingualism while maintaining cultural and linguistic heritage.

Despite the advantages, there is still debate among educators and policymakers about the extent to which Malay as L1 should be used in English (L2) language classrooms. Some argue that excessive reliance on L1 may impede full immersion in L2, potentially slowing down language acquisition (Sundari & Febriyanti, 2021). However, the prevailing view suggests that a balanced approach, where Malay is used strategically to support understanding without overshadowing English exposure, can provide an optimal learning environment for Malaysian students.

By leveraging Malay as a mediating tool, educators can enhance students' ability to generate ideas and engage meaningfully in English language activities, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and effective educational framework. This approach not only respects the linguistic background of students but also aligns with Malaysia's vision of producing proficient bilingual individuals who are equipped to thrive in both local and global contexts

Theoretical Framework of the Study

Sociocultural Theory, as proposed by Lev Vygotsky, emphasizes the fundamental role of social interaction and cultural tools in the development of cognition. According to Vygotsky, learning is a socially mediated process, where interactions with more knowledgeable others—such as teachers, peers, and parents—help learners internalize new knowledge and skills. This perspective can be directly related to the use of a first language (L1) as a mediating tool in second language (L2) learning.

The Role of Mediation: Vygotsky's theory posits that learning occurs through mediation, where tools such as language, symbols, and texts help bridge the gap between what learners can do independently and what they can achieve with assistance. In L2 learning, L1 can act as a mediating tool that helps learners make sense of new L2 concepts. For example, when students use their L1 to discuss and process L2 content, they are effectively using their existing linguistic and cognitive resources to scaffold their understanding of the new language (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD): Vygotsky introduced the concept of the Zone of Proximal

Development, which refers to the range of tasks that a learner can perform with the help of a more knowledgeable individual but cannot yet do independently. Using L1 in L2 learning can provide the scaffolding needed for learners to operate within their ZPD. By using L1, students can clarify meanings, negotiate understanding, and build the necessary foundation to advance their L2 skills (Li, 2023).

Cultural Tools and Internalization: Language itself is a cultural tool that facilitates thought and communication. Vygotsky argued that through interaction and the use of language, individuals internalize the external, social speech, transforming it into internal thought processes. In this context, using L1 in L2 classrooms allows learners to engage in higher-order thinking and internalize new linguistic concepts by connecting them to their pre-existing knowledge base (Mitchell, Myles, & Marsden, 2019). This process of internalization is crucial for deep learning and comprehension.

Social Interaction and Collaborative Learning: Sociocultural Theory underscores the importance of collaborative learning environments where students actively engage with each other. Using L1 in group discussions allows students to share ideas, ask questions, and provide explanations that might be more difficult to articulate in L2. This collaborative use of L1 fosters a deeper understanding of L2, as learners co-construct knowledge and negotiate meaning through dialogue (Walldén, 2020).

In summary, Sociocultural Theory by Vygotsky provides a robust framework for understanding the benefits of L1 mediation in L2 learning. By recognizing the role of social interaction, mediation, and cultural tools in cognitive development, educators can leverage L1 as a valuable resource in facilitating L2 acquisition. This approach not only supports the cognitive processes involved in learning a new language but also respects the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of learners.

The current social environment in Malaysia lacks sufficient support for the cognitive development of students with low English proficiency, which hinders their ability to effectively master the English language. This limited access to supportive resources leads these students to rely on the most readily available tool, their first language (L1), as a mediator to facilitate their learning of the second language (L2). Therefore, this study examines how Malay, as the L1, is used to enhance the ability of students with low English proficiency to perform tasks in English (L2).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Given that social interaction is considered a form of mediation for completing specific tasks (Vygotsky, 1978), this study employed group discussions as a method of data collection to observe the use of L1 as a mediating tool in L2 learning among the participants. Using a purposive sampling approach, the study selected six diploma students from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) who exhibited varying levels of English proficiency. The participants' English proficiency levels were determined based on the grades they achieved in an English course taken during the previous academic semester. It is important to note that all diploma students at this public university are required to complete two English courses: English Language Skills I (ELC121) in the first semester and English Language Skills II (ELC151) in the following semester.

In line with the study's focus, the selected participants were diploma students currently enrolled in the ELC151 course, who had performed poorly in the ELC121 course during the sampling period. For the ELC121 course, grades range from A+ as the highest level of proficiency to C as the minimum acceptable level required to progress to the ELC151 course in the subsequent semester (Tam et al., 2010). Consequently, this study categorized students who received a grade of C in the ELC121 course as having low English proficiency.

Background of Participants

Group A comprised of three female students of 18 years of age, which were randomly given pseudonyms as Aliyah, Balqis, and Camilla. These students claimed that they practiced speaking English with their family

members every now and then. This implied that they had opportunities outside the classroom to genuinely practice L2. However, their performance in the English course (ELC121) slightly differed from one another where Aliyah obtained grade B-, Balqis obtained grade B, and Camilla obtained C+.

Similarly, Group B consisted of three 18-year-old female students, who were randomly assigned the pseudonyms Dania, Ezzah, and Fatin. These students were selected purposively based on a common characteristic: each had received a grade of C in the English course (ELC121). Consequently, this study inferred that these three students possessed a similar level of English language proficiency. However, when questioned about their use of L2 at home, Ezzah did not provide a definitive response. In contrast, Dania and Fatin admitted that they did not practice L2 at home. This suggests that their primary opportunity to engage with L2 occurred in the classroom, particularly during English lessons. The summary of the participants' background and exposure to English is displayed in table 1 below.

Table I: Background of the Participants

Group	Participants	ELC121 Result	English at Home
A	Aliyah	B-	Yes
	Balqis	B	Yes
	Camilla	C+	Yes
B	Dania	C	No
	Ezzah	C	*
	Fatin	C	No

*The item was left unanswered by Ezzah.

Data Collection Procedure

Following the classroom observation methodology outlined by Stough (2001), this study's data collection process included a recorded group discussion among the selected participants, captured in both audio and video formats for detailed subsequent analysis. Prior to this, the lecturer responsible for teaching the English course (ELC151) identified potential participants based on an essay-writing task administered during the first week of the course. In this task, students were asked to provide a self-introduction, including their age and their grade from the previous English course (ELC121).

After selecting the participants, they were instructed to complete an essay-writing task within one hour, without the presence of the lecturer. The essay topic was sourced from a previous final English examination paper used by the university. Participants were allowed additional time to complete the task if necessary. The specific instructions for the writing task are outlined as follows:

"University graduates are finding it difficult to get jobs because they lack good communication and interpersonal skills. Do you agree with this statement? State your opinion in not less than 350 words."

Audio Recorded Observation

The group discussion session commenced with the distribution of the writing task to both groups, without specifying which language should be used for verbal discussion. A video camera was positioned at a distance facing the participants to minimize distractions and capture the details of the group discussion, particularly non-verbal interactions that might not be captured by the audio recorder. An audio recorder was placed in the center of the table around which the participants gathered to ensure high-quality audio capture. Both the audio

and video recordings were subsequently analyzed to inform the next session of the stimulated recall interview.

Stimulated Recall Interview

Stimulated recall interviews for both groups were scheduled for the following week. Prior to the interviews, participants were given the opportunity to view the video recordings of their group discussions. Stimulated recall is a technique that allows participants to recall their thought processes during a specific event, using visual or audio recordings as prompts (Fox-Turnbull, 2009). These recordings are obtained by the researcher and used during the interview session to facilitate recall (Stough, 2001). In this study, participants were encouraged to pause the video at any point to comment on their actions and interactions. Consistent with the approach of Stough (2001), the video was paused, and participants were asked several open-ended questions if they did not provide any comments after two minutes of viewing. The primary findings of this study were derived from the audio transcripts of the discussions, while data from the stimulated recall interviews were used to clarify and validate the participants' actions and interactions throughout the group discussions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, transcription of participants' speech is included to demonstrate the findings. For ease of readers' comprehension, table 2 shows transcription symbols and their meanings as used in this study.

Table II: Transcription Symbols

Transcription Symbols	Meaning	Example
Italic	Malay words and/or speech	*Bukan, bukan.*
(…)	English translation	*Bukan, bukan* (No, no.)
((…))	Speaker's reference	Yes, requirement. That's what ((I)) wanted to say.
[…]	Transcriber's description on participants' actions.	*Ni apa?* (What's this?) [pointing at a word on the essay paper]

Ease of Speech Delivery

In many times during the group discussions, both group A and B used L1 as their mode of communication. It can be observed that L1 functions as an alternative in case speaking in L2 prevented the other group members from getting the message that they tried to convey. In one example, Aliyah in group A was heard repeating 'interact' and even changed its form into a noun to persuade her friends to use that word. Her effort ended as soon as she translated it in L1. When asked during stimulated recall interview, she thought the response by Balqis and Camilla indicated their uncertainty of the meaning of 'interaction'. After a few tries, she decided that translating it into L1 would help, even though the term in both L1 and L2 is very much alike.

Aliyah: In universities, normally students must have good communication to interact.

Camilla: To interact?

Balqis: To interact *ke*? (Is it 'to interact'?)

Aliyah: To interact with other people *la*. Interaction. Interact. *Interaksi*. (Interaction)

In the context of second language (L2) learning, the ease of speech delivery plays a critical role in effective communication, especially during group discussions. This is particularly evident in multilingual settings, where students may frequently switch to their first language (L1) to ensure clarity and comprehension. In the observed interactions of groups A and B, participants often resorted to using L1, indicating its function as a

facilitative tool when L2 use alone did not suffice to convey the intended message.

This behavior is supported by the sociolinguistic concept of code-switching, where speakers alternate between languages to enhance communication efficacy (Blom & Gumperz, 1972). In the given example, Aliyah's use of L1 exemplifies strategic code-switching. Initially, she attempted to encourage the use of the English word "interact" by repeating it and even modifying its form to emphasize its importance. However, upon sensing the uncertainty of her peers, Balqis and Camilla, regarding the meaning of "interaction," Aliyah opted to translate it into Malay, their shared L1. This decision underscores the practical use of L1 as a communicative resource, which aligns with research findings suggesting that learners often revert to their L1 to aid understanding and facilitate smoother communication.

Aliyah's translation into L1 not only clarifies the meaning but also reduces cognitive load, allowing for more fluent and spontaneous interaction among group members. Even though the terms "interact" and "interaksi" are phonetically similar, the use of L1 offers a sense of familiarity and reassurance, ensuring that all group members are on the same page. This is a common practice in multilingual educational settings, where L1 is employed as a scaffold to support the learning and use of L2, thereby enabling learners to navigate conversations more effectively.

This example illustrates the nuanced role that L1 can play in L2 learning environments, particularly in terms of easing speech delivery. It highlights how students navigate language barriers by leveraging their linguistic resources, thereby fostering a more inclusive and communicative atmosphere. Such practices are not merely a fallback for linguistic deficits but are integral to effective communication and understanding in a multilingual context (Macaro, 2020).

Ease of Speech Production

Another way in which L1 supports students in completing L2 tasks is by alleviating the challenges associated with speech production. Nazary (2008) has identified this issue among L2 learners, noting that participants often ask how to express specific words in English. This problem is closely linked to vocabulary limitations, which can make communication and the articulation of ideas difficult. In typical L2 classroom activities, a certain amount of time is allocated for task completion. For students with limited L2 vocabulary, recalling L2 terms necessary for conversation can be time-consuming. As a result, it is natural for these students to revert to using L1 to ensure they can contribute effectively and complete the task within the given timeframe.

The use of L1, therefore, facilitated the participants' ability to complete the L2 writing task by aiding in speech production. Participants frequently inquired in L1 to find the equivalent words in L2, as highlighted by Nazary (2008). This highlights the vocabulary challenges faced by participants, which hinder their ability to communicate and express ideas. The following excerpt from a conversation among participants in Group A illustrates this point.:

Balqis: *Dia nak diorang punya.. apa?* (They want their… what's the word?)

Camilla: Education? [Guessing Balqis's point]

Balqis: *Bukan, bukan.* (No, no.)

Aliyah: *Orang cakap…* (They say…)

Balqis: *Bukan, macam.. alah kalau kita minta kerja kena..* requirement! (No, I mean… if we apply for a job we need… requirement!)

Aliyah: *Ha*, requirement. ((*Saya)) Nak cakap tu la. Kita, kita beritahu la. Penting tu.* (Yes, requirement. That's what ((I)) wanted to say. We, we have to mention that. It's important.)

Based on the above excerpt, Balqis shared her thoughts on the requirements set by employers for fresh graduate job seekers. However, her delivery of thought was delayed for approximately seven seconds from the

moment she spoke of this idea, until the moment she found the word 'requirement' to express her idea. Supposedly a duration of seven seconds is a considerable amount of time taken to recall a particular L2 word but it was not the case for Balqis. Just when she seemingly almost gave up in recalling the L2 word, and she tried to describe it in L1 instead, she finally managed to recall the word 'requirement' right before she had done describing it in L1. Balqis still encountered difficulty in expressing herself in L2 despite obtaining grade B in the previous English course. This implied that the other participants from Group B who obtained grade C in the similar course would have encountered higher difficulty in expressing their thoughts or ideas.

Interestingly, the search for words in L2 to provide the content for the writing task was only performed by participants from Group A. On the contrary, participants from Group B who are less proficient as compared to those in Group A, searched for words in L1 and translated them to complete the L2 writing task. These participants from Group B managed to engage in a continuous group discussion for main ideas. However, they experienced an abrupt pause when these ideas were to be translated into L2 for their writing task. Nazary (2008) revealed that 84% of those who sought for translation from L1 to L2 were, in fact, students with intermediate proficiency level while those with low proficiency level are less likely to seek for translation. Still, given that the result of Nazary's study was based on questionnaire survey, the type of situation that prompted these students with intermediate proficiency level to seek for translation and the reason why those with low proficiency level did not seek for such approach were not clarified.

Nonetheless, there may be a plausible rationalization for such scenario. Students with intermediate proficiency level are capable to engage spontaneous conversations in L2, including conversing with their peers in group discussion. They are likely to convert generated ideas from the group discussion into L2 writing task. On the other hand, students with low proficiency level are less capable to engage conversations in L2 due to their limited vocabulary range, which explains why L1 and L2 are utilized interchangeably whenever it is necessary. Students with low proficiency level are more likely to seek for L1 terms in L2 when they feel the urgency to complete the L2 task such as the L2 writing task in this present study. As asserted by Vygotsky (1978) in SCT, the comparison between students of different proficiency levels in this study reaffirmed that each individual has different actual developmental level despite the similar age. Students with lower proficiency level constantly depended on L1 to obtain extended vocabulary range in L2 for the similar L2 writing task between both groups. Therefore, the function of L1 as a mediator to develop higher mental function should be considered in L2 learning process.

Besides that, participants utilized L1 as a mediator to define unfamiliar L2 terms considering their limited vocabulary range in L1. In other words, L1 was regarded as a source of reference for these L2 students. In this study, participants defined 'interpersonal skills' in L1 to grasp the meaning of the term, which allowed them to have a focused group discussion with respect to the topic of their L2 writing task. Similar process was repeated when the participants came across other L2 terms, which were presumed to be related to the topic of their group discussion. Participants from Group B took the initiative to utilize available dictionary and reference books at the library for idea generation.

Apart from that, it could be observed that peer assistance in L1 took place when participants from Group B encountered unfamiliar L2 terms. Participants attempted to translate these unfamiliar L2 terms to L1, which assisted them in their evaluation of whether the term reflected what they wanted to express for L2 writing task. The entire process of idea generation, which included identification of ideas, evaluation of ideas, and expansion of ideas, was assisted by their peers for participants to grasp the meaning of unfamiliar L2 terms. For example, refer the following conversation among the participants from Group B:

Ezzah: *Ni apa?* (What's this?) [pointing at a word on the essay paper]

Fatin: Talking with co-workers, *maksudnya kawan-kawan sekerja la. Kawan-kawan sekerja,* co-workers. (Talking with co-workers, it means colleagues. Colleagues, co-workers.)

After a while, Ezzah used the L2 word that she had learned, but instead of saying 'co-workers', she mentioned 'workers'.

Ezzah: Okay maintain a relationships with the workers.

Fatin: Ha, relationship with co-workers *kan*? Co-workers *pekerja kan?* (Ha, relationship with co-workers, right? Co-workers means colleagues, right?)

In a learning process, making mistakes is common. 'Worker', as defined by Cambridge dictionary, is a person who works for a company or organization but does not have a powerful position, while 'co-worker' is a person who someone works with, especially with a similar job or level of responsibility. Fatin who possibly noticed the mistake made by Ezzah, corrected her indirectly by repeating the word with 'co-' this time. Nearing the end of the discussion, Ezzah was finally able to use the word 'co-worker' in her speech.

Ezzah: *Pasaran, pasaran sekarang dia nak memerlukan seseorang yang dia boleh..* ability *dia dari segi* relationships with co-workers. (The market, the current market needs someone who has.. the ability in terms of relationships with co-workers.)

The term 'co-workers' was frequently brought up in the group discussion and subsequently utilized as the main idea in L2 writing task once the participants realized the meaning of this term. This signified how the utilization of L1 defined unfamiliar L2 terms for participants to explore wider range of ideas. Additionally, the utilization of the term 'co-workers' instead of its L1 term throughout the group discussion implied that utilizing L1 as a mediator in L2 learning did not necessarily impede L2 learning process or encourage continuous utilization of L1 among students with low English proficiency level. With that, this proved that L1 could be utilized as a mediator in L2 learning for students with low English proficiency level (Fauziah et al., 2009), which contradicted the notion that the utilization of L1 impedes L2 learning process (Auerbach, 1993).

Conclusively, this study revealed the significance of utilizing L1 in group discussion among students with intermediate and low proficiency levels for L2 learning. In particular, students with intermediate proficiency level utilized L1 to express their ideas to their peers while students with low proficiency level utilized L1 to deliver their idea as well as to grasp the meaning of the unfamiliar terms and concepts in L2, which expanded the scope of discussion. In short, the utilization of L1, as a mediator, assisted learners to overcome ZPD in L2 learning.

CONCLUSION

The L1 functioned as a mediator when the participants presumed that their L2 speech did not convey what they wanted to express, which assisted in their speech production and ensured continuous active participation. Meanwhile, participants from the group of mixed proficiency levels searched for words in L2 to provide content for the writing task, while the participants from the other group searched for words in L1 and translated them to complete the L2 writing task. In fact, defining an unfamiliar L2 terms in L1 has enabled them to explore other range of ideas. Engaging these students in the context of L1 would provide opportunities for these students to explore ideas in L2 learning process. Therefore, it is pivotal to take into account the needs of students with low proficiency level for a mediator in their L2 learning process by assisting them through the mediating process whilst ensuring that these students do not become too dependent on L1.

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