



## Exploring bilingualism as a pedagogical tool for enhancing English language teaching: a case study of Pakistan's intermediate colleges

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### Abstract:

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This study examines the role of bilingualism as a facilitative tool in English language teaching (ELT) at the intermediate level in Pakistan. It challenges the prevailing assumption that the use of L1 in ESL (English as a Second Language) classes limits students' communicative abilities, proposing instead that strategic use of bilingualism aids in the L2 acquisition process. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study integrates qualitative and quantitative data collected from 65 in-service English teachers across 10 government colleges. The Revised Hierarchical Model (RHM) by Kroll and Stewart (1994) underpins the theoretical framework. The findings indicate that limited and contextually appropriate use of L1 enhances comprehension, provides motivation, and facilitates complex L2 instruction. Contrary to the notion of "no L1 in L2 classes," the study advocates a balanced use of bilingualism, highlighting its potential benefits for improving ESL teaching methodologies. This research calls for broader acceptance of bilingual practices in ESL settings and suggests implications for future pedagogical strategies in similar educational contexts.

**Keywords:** Bilingualism, ESL, Code-Switching, L1, L2, Language acquisition, Teaching methodology, Motivation, English as second language, Communicative abilities.

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## 1. Introduction

Pakistan's linguistic landscape is diverse, featuring a rich tapestry of local, provincial, and national languages. Urdu, the national language, coexists with English, the official language and the primary medium of instruction in both public and private educational institutions. In many ESL (English as a Second Language) classrooms, the exclusive use of L2 (English) remains challenging due to limited proficiency among both teachers and learners. Consequently, the use of L1 (Urdu) has become a frequent practice, leading to significant debate among linguists and educators about its effectiveness.

This study aims to investigate the role of bilingualism as a facilitative tool in the context of ESL teaching at the intermediate level in government colleges in Punjab, Pakistan. It specifically addresses whether L1 can be leveraged to support the learning of L2 without hindering communicative competence. While much research has examined the general benefits of bilingualism, limited focus has been placed on its application as a pedagogical tool within the Pakistani educational framework. This research does not advocate for a preference of bilingualism over monolingual approaches; instead, it explores its practical application in enhancing students' L2 proficiency, particularly among learners with limited English exposure.

The study adopts a fact-based approach to understanding the practical challenges and benefits of integrating L1 in L2 instruction, focusing on its potential to bridge linguistic gaps in traditional classroom settings.

### 1.1. Statement of the problem

Using L1 in L2 classes at the Intermediate level in government colleges is a recognized phenomenon. This situation arises from government institutions, where most students obtain their matriculation degree, typically through L1 as the medium of instruction. As a result, these students remain unable to gain L2 proficiency among themselves. Their speaking and listening skills are mostly ignored. By the time they reach college, they face trouble in settling themselves into L2 classes. To explain some topics in the ESL lesson, the teacher requires the help of the L1. Therefore, bilingualism becomes crucial for teachers and pupils at this level. There have not been enough studies conducted in Pakistan on the importance of bilingualism as a teaching tool and facilitator to decide whether bilingualism benefits students.

### 1.2. Significance of the study

Studying bilingualism is crucial because it opens doors to opportunities and challenges that bilingual education presents to pupils. Learning a second language in conventional classroom settings presents many challenges for Pakistani students. In most cases, L2 instruction in ESL classes is insufficient for pupils to learn English. They also require some L1 usage. The limited use of L1 in the classroom makes them feel comfortable. This research study aims to gather a fact-based understanding of all these issues about applying bilingualism in L2 classes. This research will also contribute to understanding the antiquated belief that there is "no L1 in L2 class" and will look for a fact-based resolution to this dispute. In addition, the current study will be useful to government college teachers in Punjab. Studying this phenomenon would be fascinating because it directly relates to intermediate-level college students' challenges when learning English in an L1 setting. So, studying bilingualism is practical and significant for English language teaching in Pakistan.

### 1.3. Research questions

The paper's research question is: What part does L1 play in efficiently teaching L2? How much and in what way should L1 be used in ESL classes? And how does bilingualism help ESL teachers improve their teaching methodology?

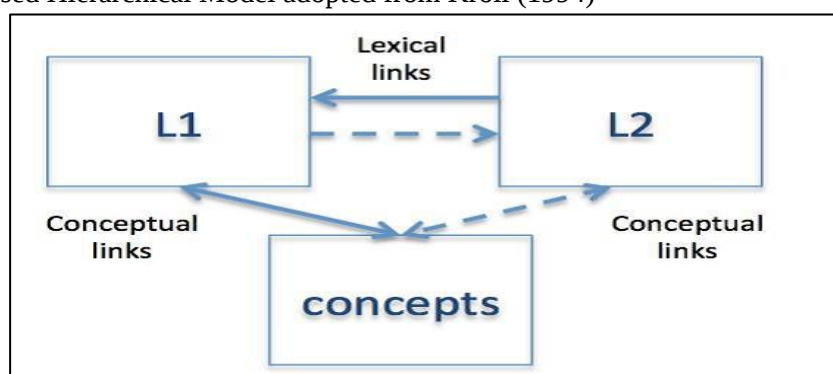
### 1.4. Objectives of the study

This research project will investigate the following goals: (a) To highlight that using L1 in L2 class makes teaching more effective, (b) To focus on the ways of using bilingualism improves students' language proficiency, (c) To determine how often L1 should be allowed in ESL classes, (d) To explore the benefits of bilingualism in explaining complex concepts in ESL classes, (e) To find out the role of bilingualism in making teaching methodology effective, and (f) To suggest appropriate actions for implementing bilingualism in ESL classes.

### 1.5. Theoretical framework of study

The theoretical foundation of this study is grounded in the Revised Hierarchical Model (RHM) proposed by Kroll and Stewart (1994). This model serves as a robust framework for understanding the cognitive processes involved in bilingual language acquisition and offers valuable insights into the interplay between L1 (Urdu) and L2 (English) in ESL (English as a Second Language) classrooms.

Figure 1: Revised Hierarchical Model adopted from Kroll (1994)



The Revised Hierarchical Model (RHM) by Kroll and Stewart (1994) underpins the theoretical framework of this study. The RHM posits that bilingual individuals develop two distinct but interconnected lexicons: one for the mother tongue (L1) and another for the second language (L2). At the conceptual level, both languages share a common system of meaning, but the strength of the associations varies depending on the stage of language learning. For the beginner and intermediate learners, the connection between L1 words and their meanings is typically stronger, while L2 associations are initially weaker but grow as proficiency is increased.

The RHM is particularly relevant in the context of ESL teaching, where students often rely on their L1 as a cognitive scaffold during the early stages of L2 learning. According to the model, learners tend to process L2 words by initially mapping them onto their L1 equivalents. This suggests that bilingual strategies, such as code-switching and the selective use of L1 for instruction, can facilitate L2 acquisition by leveraging these pre-existing connections.

The RHM provides a theoretical justification for the strategic use of L1 in ESL classrooms, particularly for intermediate-level learners who may not yet have strong lexical links in L2. By utilizing L1 selectively, teachers can help students build connections between L1 and L2, accelerating the learning process and reducing cognitive load. This approach aligns with the empirical findings of the current study, which indicate that bilingualism, when applied thoughtfully, enhances comprehension and facilitate the teaching of complex concepts.

While the RHM offers valuable insights, it also has limitations. The model does not fully account for the sociocultural and contextual factors that influence bilingual language processing, such as the learners' exposure to L2 outside the classroom and their individual differences in language proficiency. Furthermore, the model's focus on lexical associations may overlook the dynamic, interactive nature of language learning, which involves not only vocabulary but also syntax, pragmatics and cultural nuances.

## **2. Literature review**

The literature on bilingualism in ESL (English as a Second Language) education spans various perspectives, highlighting its potential benefits and challenges. Bilingualism has often been viewed as a hindrance in language acquisition, primarily due to concerns about interference from the mother tongue (L1). However, recent research has begun to challenge this notion, suggesting that the strategic use of L1 can serve as a valuable pedagogical tool in facilitating L2 learning.

### **2.1. Bilingualism as a facilitating tool**

Research has shown that bilingualism contributes positively to students' cognitive and linguistic development. The research of Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) asserts that bilingualism enhances both verbal and academic growth, while Cummins and Swain (1986) emphasize its role in supporting deeper linguistic understanding. The study of Tang (2002) found that using L1 in ESL classrooms aids the students in acquiring L2 proficiency, a sentiment echoed by Schweers (1999), who reported that the students preferred occasional L1 usage for better comprehension.

### **2.3. The role of code-switching**

Code-switching, a common feature in bilingual classrooms, has been debated extensively. While some researchers, such as Dulay (1982) and Lott (1983), argue that it leads to interference, others like Ellis (1997) highlight its usefulness as a strategy for bridging linguistic gaps. Code-switching can help clarify complex concepts and provide cognitive relief, allowing students to process information more effectively. Auerbach (1993) and Turnbull and Arnett (2002) argue for a pragmatic approach, supporting limited L1 use for specific functions such as classroom management and grammar instruction.

### **2.4. Historical perspective on L1 use in ESL teaching**

The grammar-translation method, one of the earliest language teaching approaches, heavily relied on L1 for instruction. However, with the advent of the Direct Method, there was a push towards complete immersion in L2, discouraging any use of L1. Recent pedagogical shifts, however, acknowledge the impracticality of an English-only approach, especially in

monolingual ESL contexts. Researchers like Nunan and Lamb (1996) and Dornyei and Kormos (1998) suggest that using L1 strategically can facilitate learning, especially for beginners with the limited L2 exposure.

### **2.5. Challenges in the Pakistani context**

In Pakistan, the role of L1 in ESL classrooms is influenced by socio-cultural and educational factors. The rigid framework of English language teaching policies, combined with large class sizes and untrained teachers (Siddiqui, 2007), complicates the implementation of an L2-only approach. Kamhi-Stein and Mahboob (2005) observed that many ESL teachers in Pakistan struggle with English proficiency themselves, further necessitating the use of L1 for effective instruction.

### **2.6. Conclusion of the literature review**

The literature presents a nuanced view of bilingualism in ESL contexts. While there are valid concerns about over-reliance on L1, there is growing evidence supporting its limited and strategic use in facilitating L2 learning. The current study aims to build on this body of research by examining the specific role of bilingualism as a facilitative tool in ESL classrooms in government colleges in Punjab, Pakistan, with a focus on understanding its practical implications for teaching methodologies.

## **3. Research methodology**

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches to explore the role of bilingualism as a facilitative tool in English language teaching at the intermediate level. The use of a mixed-methods approach allows for a comprehensive analysis of the complex dynamics between L1 usage and L2 learning in ESL classrooms.

### **3.1. Research setting and participants**

The study was conducted across 10 government colleges in , Pakistan. The participants included 65 in-service English teachers with diverse teaching experiences, ranging from newly appointed instructors to seasoned educators with M.A. and M. Phil qualification in English Language and literature. 65 active English teachers who teach at the Intermediate level at ten state-run colleges located in district answered the questionnaire. The questionnaire was initially given to the subjects in 75 copies. However, only 65 respondents gave their completed questionnaires back. The survey participants were English teachers with multiple teaching experiences. A few teachers held an M. Phil degree, while most of the teachers held an M. A degree in English Language and Literature.

### **3.2. Data collection tool**

A structured survey questionnaire was developed to gather data, focusing on the participants' perceptions and practices regarding the use of bilingualism in ESL teaching. The questionnaire consisted of 19 closed-ended statements, designed to align with the objectives of the study. The statements aimed to assess the teachers' attitudes towards L1 usage, its perceived benefits, and the extent to which they increase it in their instructional practices.

### 3.3. Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS (version 29.0.2). Frequency tables and descriptive statistics were used to interpret the survey responses. A subset of the responses (15% of the total) was manually checked for accuracy before the analysis to ensure the reliability of the data entry. The analysis aimed to identify trends in teachers' practices and their perceptions of the impact of bilingualism on L2 learning.

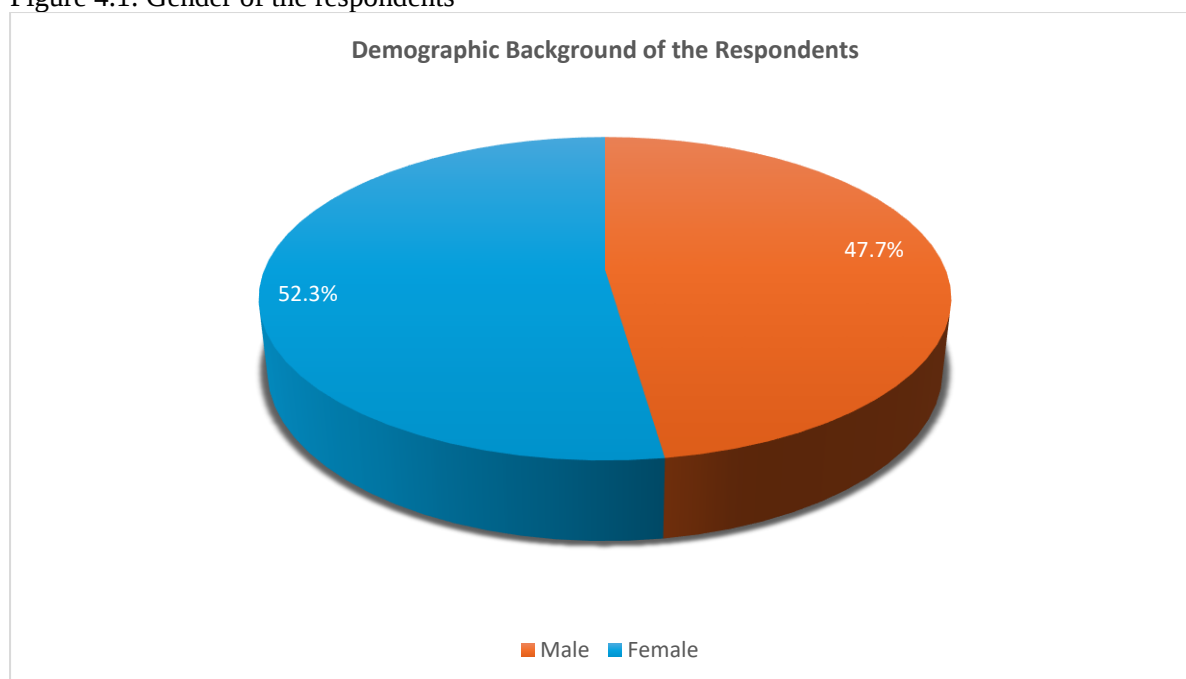
## 4. Data analysis and discussion

The data collected from the survey responses were systematically analysed using SPSS (version 29.0.2) to understand the role of bilingualism as a facilitating tool in ESL (English as a Second Language) teaching at the intermediate level. The analysis was divided into several key sections based on the survey statements, focusing on respondents' demographics, teaching practices, and perceptions of L1 use in L2 instruction.

### 4.1. Gender of the respondents

The data in figure 4.1 show details of the analysis about the gender of the study respondents. The gender data is based on male and female categories. There were 47.7% male and 52.3% female respondents. The representation of both genders is nearly equal, making it more valuable to this study.

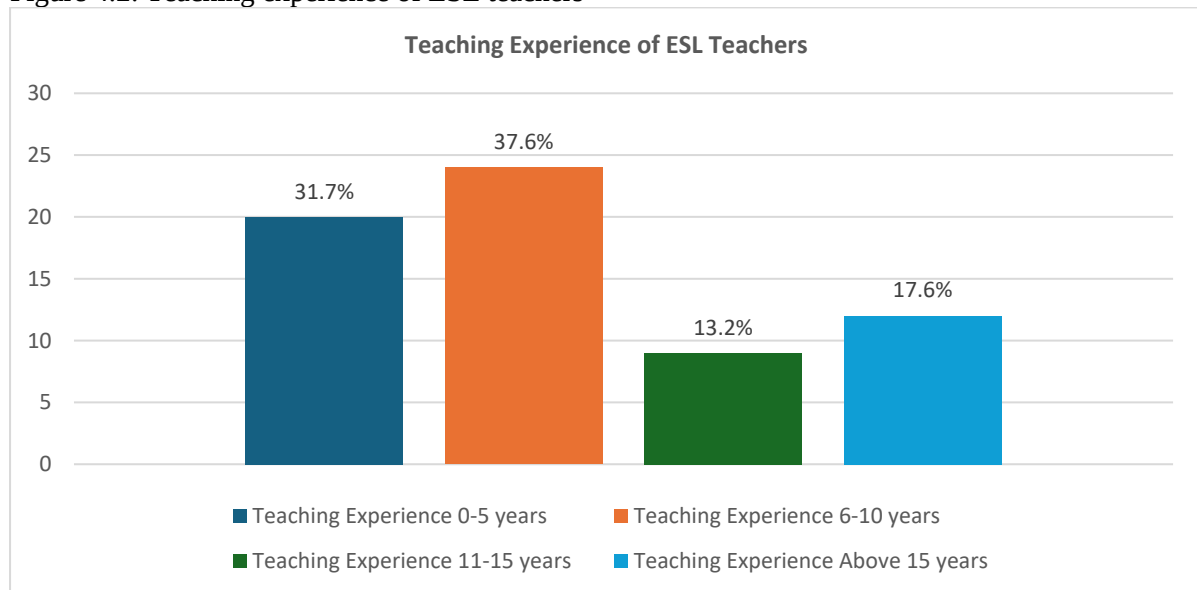
Figure 4.1: Gender of the respondents



### 4.2. Teaching experience of the respondents

Figure 4.2 reflects the teaching experience of ESL teachers. The respondents varied in teaching experience, with 31.7% having 0-5 years, 37.6% having 6-10 years, 13.2% with 11-15 years, and 17.6% with over 15 years of experience. This diverse experience profile provided a broad perspective on the teaching practices in government colleges.

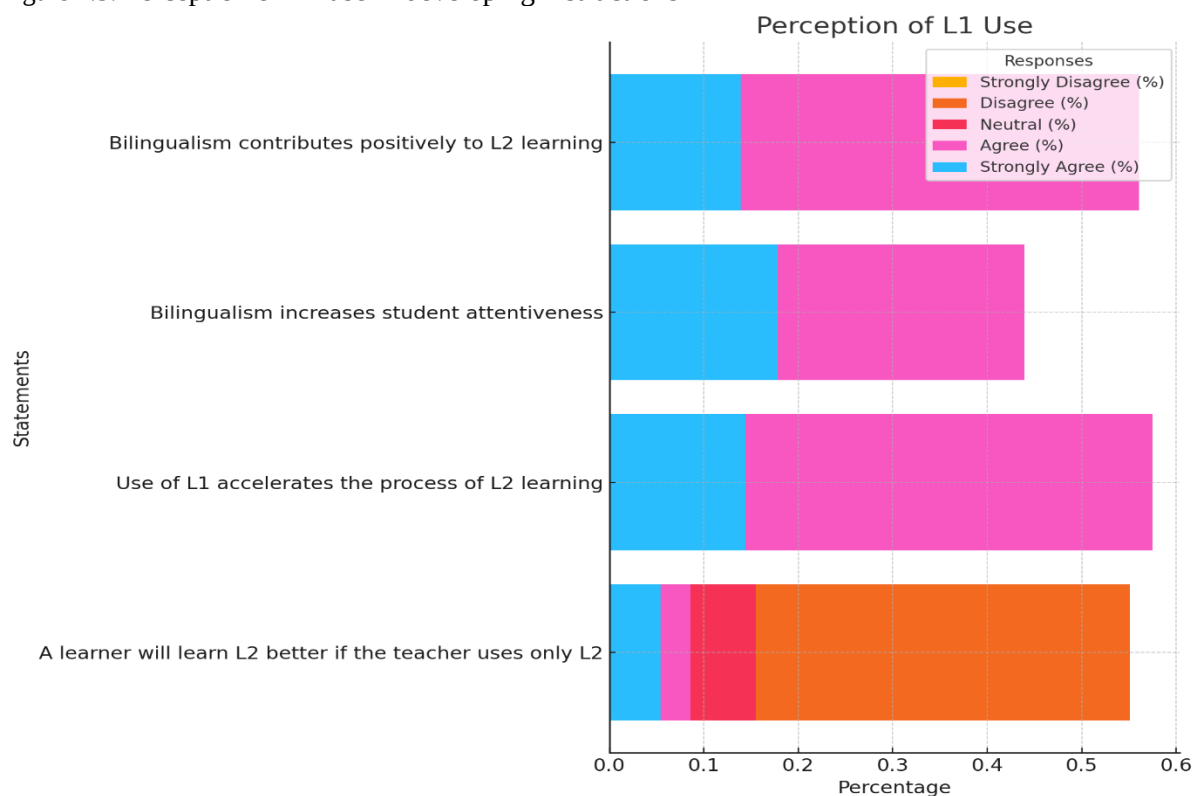
Figure 4.2: Teaching experience of ESL teachers



#### 4.3. Perception of L1 use in developing instructions

There were four statements in this section of the questionnaire. The majority of the respondents (70.6%) agreed that using L1 aids in delivering instructions, with 14.4% strongly agreeing. Similarly, 66.2% of the teachers reported that instructions given in L2, when supported by L1 explanations, were easier for students to comprehend. The data suggests that bilingualism is perceived as a practical tool for clarifying complex concepts and facilitating smoother classroom interactions. It also helps learners in better understanding of L2.

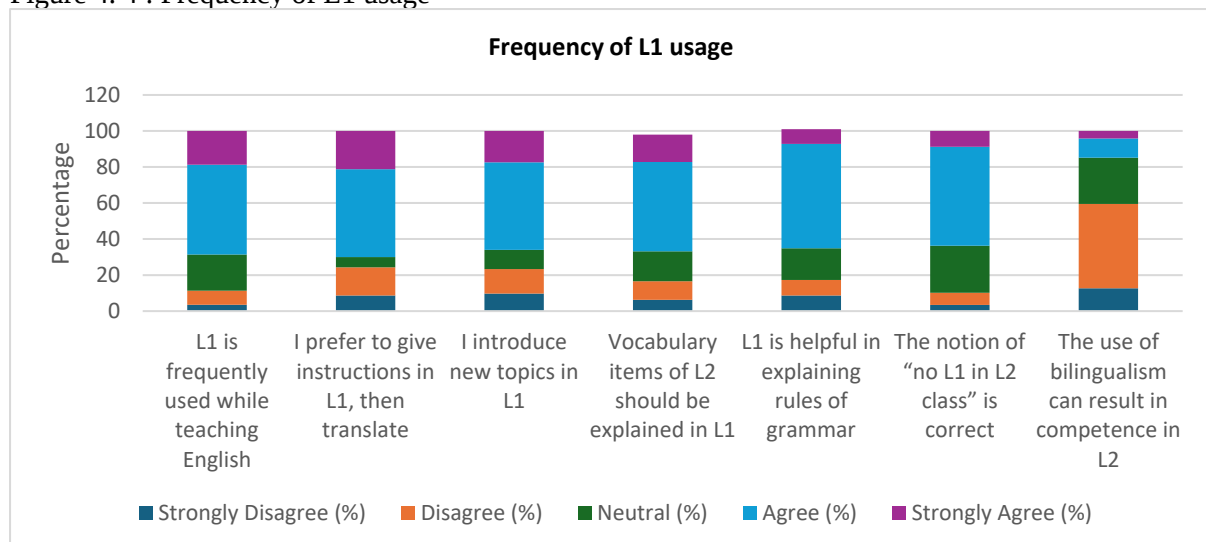
Figure 4.3: Perception of L1 use in developing instructions



#### 4.4. Use of L1 in ESL class

This portion of the questionnaire asked ESL teachers for their opinions on the extent of the usage of bilingualism in ESL classes. The ESL teachers were further asked to share their views on how to use bilingualism in class. This section was based on 7 statements. The data shows that ESL teachers frequently incorporated L1 in their ESL classes, with 68.6% agreeing that they prefer to give initial instructions in L1 before transitioning to L2. The introduction of new topics was also often done in L1 (66%), reflecting the need to scaffold learning through familiar linguistic resources. Grammar explanations and vocabulary translations were commonly provided in L1, as 56.9% and 64.8% of respondents, respectively, highlighted its effectiveness in accelerating comprehension.

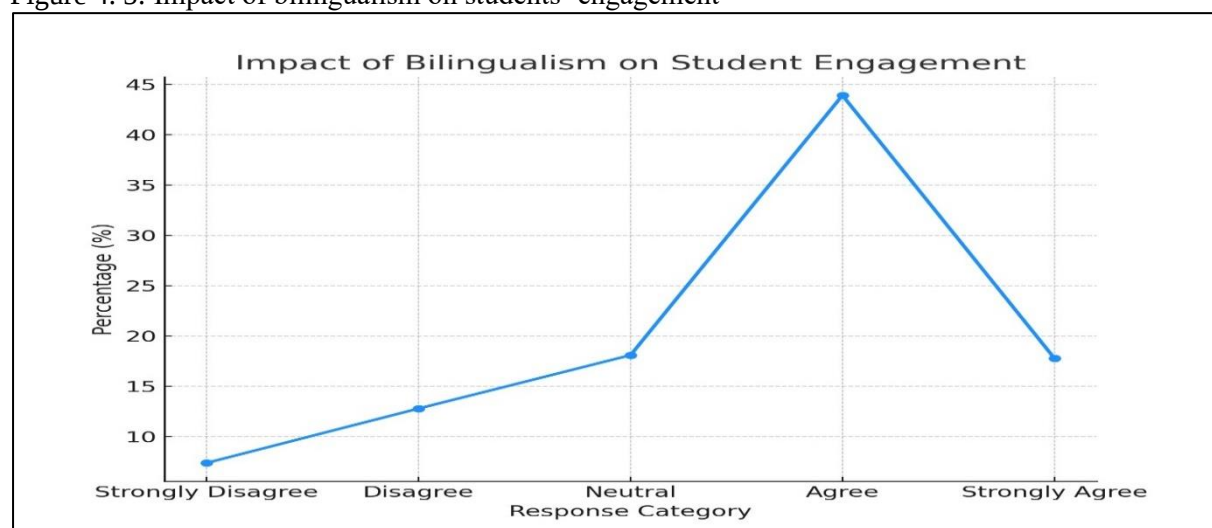
Figure 4. 4 : Frequency of L1 usage



#### 4.5. Impact of bilingualism on students' engagement

The majority of participants (70.5%) disagreed with the statement that L2-only instruction leads to more effective L2 learning. Instead, 72% of the respondents indicated that the strategic use of L1 accelerates the learning process. The teachers found that L1 usage helped maintain student attention and engagement, with 61.7% agreeing that bilingualism enhances attentiveness during lessons.

Figure 4. 5: Impact of bilingualism on students' engagement



## **4.6. Analysis and discussion**

The findings of this study reveal a nuanced perspective on the role of bilingualism in English language teaching (ELT) at the intermediate level in Pakistan, particularly within government college settings. The results suggest that while the traditional monolingual approach in ESL classrooms has been widely advocated, the pragmatic use of bilingualism, specifically through the strategic use of L1 (Urdu), offers notable pedagogical benefits.

### **4.6.1. Bilingualism as a pedagogical tool**

The study highlights that the use of L1 facilitates better comprehension and engagement in ESL classes. Most respondents indicated that using L1 helps bridge the linguistic gap, especially for students with limited exposure to L2 (English). This aligns with previous research by Cummins and Swain (1986), which supports the idea that L1 serves as a cognitive scaffold, helping learners build a stronger foundation for L2 acquisition. By providing initial explanations in L1, teachers can address complex grammatical rules and vocabulary more effectively, which enhances student understanding and reduces anxiety associated with learning solely in L2.

### **4.6.2. Challenges of a monolingual approach**

The current study's findings challenge the notion of "English-only" instruction in ESL classrooms. The respondents' preference for using L1 reflects the practical challenges faced by educators particularly on in Pakistan, where students often struggle with English proficiency due to limited exposure outside the classroom. As Nunan and Lamb (1996) argued, strict adherence to L2-only policies may hinder the learning process, especially in monolingual societies where the students do not have ample opportunities to practice the English outside of the classroom.

### **4.6.3. Teachers' perception and methodological flexibility**

The positive attitudes of ESL teachers towards using L1 indicate a growing recognition of the benefits of bilingual education. The study found that teachers view L1 not as a crutch but as a facilitator that supports the learning process. This is consistent with Auerbach's (1993) findings, which suggest that strategic use of L1 can aid in the classroom management, provide clarity in instructions, and help students grasp difficult concepts faster. However, the study also revealed concerns among some teachers about the potential over-reliance on L1, which may limit students' opportunities to develop L2 fluency.

### **4.6.4. Balancing L1 and L2 in ESL instruction**

The data suggests that a balanced, context-driven approach to bilingualism is most effective. While excessive use of L1 may undermine the immersive experience necessary for L2 acquisition, limited and purposeful use of L1 can enhance the teaching process. The Revised Hierarchical Model (RHM) by Kroll and Stewart (1994), which guided this study, supports this view by suggesting that early-stage language learners benefit from strong conceptual connections between L1 and L2. By leveraging these connections, the teachers can facilitate smoother transitions from L1 to L2, thus gradually increasing L2 usage as the students' proficiency improves.

#### **4.6.5. Implication for policy and practice**

The findings have significant implications for language policy and pedagogical practices in ESL contexts. Educational policymakers should reconsider rigid monolingual approaches and acknowledge the potential benefits of incorporating bilingual strategies in ESL classrooms. Teacher training programs should also focus on equipping educators with skills to effectively balance L1 and L2 usage, fostering a more inclusive and supportive learning environment.

#### **4.6.7. Conclusion of discussion**

Overall, this study underscores the importance of adopting a flexible and pragmatic approach to bilingualism in ESL teaching. The positive impact of strategic L1 use on student engagement, comprehension, and motivation highlights the need for a nuanced understanding of bilingualism's role in language education. By embracing a balanced approach, educators can enhance L2 learning outcomes while respecting the linguistic realities of their students. Further research is recommended to explore long-term effects of bilingual practices and to refine teaching methodologies that integrate bilingual strategies effectively.

### **5. Conclusion**

This study explored the role of bilingualism as a facilitative tool in English language teaching (ELT) at the intermediate level in government colleges in , Pakistan. The findings highlight the potential benefits of integrating L1 (Urdu) strategically into L2 (English) instruction, challenging the conventional belief that monolingual approaches are superior in ESL classrooms.

#### **5.1. Key conclusions**

Below is the detail of key conclusions of the study;

##### **5.1.1. Strategic use of L1 enhances L2 learning**

The selective use of L1 in ESL classrooms has proven to be effective in aiding comprehension, reducing anxiety, and enhancing student motivation. By using L1 to explain complex concepts, grammar rules, and vocabulary, teachers can bridge linguistic gaps and provide cognitive support, especially for students with limited exposure to English outside the classroom.

##### **5.1.2. Balancing L1 and L2 is crucial for effective pedagogy**

While bilingualism offers clear pedagogical benefits, the findings also underscore the importance of maintaining a balanced approach. Over-reliance on L1 can hinder students' opportunities to practice L2, potentially limiting their fluency and communicative competence. Therefore, educators should use L1 judiciously, gradually increasing L2 exposure as students gain confidence and proficiency.

##### **5.1.3. Implication for teaching practices and policy**

The positive outcomes associated with strategic bilingualism suggest the need for a paradigm shift in ESL teaching methodologies, particularly in contexts like Pakistan where monolingual

English instruction may not align with the linguistic realities of students. Policymakers and curriculum designers should consider integrating bilingual strategies into teacher training programs to equip educators with the skills needed to balance L1 and L2 effectively.

#### **5.1.4. Support for bilingual education framework**

The study's results align with the Revised Hierarchical Model (RHM) by Kroll and Stewart (1994), supporting the notion that early-stage language learners benefit from the cognitive associations between L1 and L2. This reinforces the value of bilingual education frameworks that acknowledge the role of the mother tongue in facilitating L2 acquisition.

#### **5.2. Recommendations for future research**

Further research is needed to examine the long-term effects of bilingual practices on L2 proficiency and to explore the specific strategies that maximize the benefits of L1 use without impeding L2 development. Additionally, studies could investigate the impact of bilingualism on different aspects of language skills, such as speaking and writing, across diverse educational contexts.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that bilingualism, when applied thoughtfully, can serve as a valuable pedagogical tool in ESL classrooms. It offers a practical solution to the linguistic challenges faced by both teachers and students, paving the way for more inclusive and effective language instruction. By embracing a balanced approach that respects the linguistic backgrounds of learners, educators can create a supportive environment that fosters better language acquisition and broader educational outcomes.

#### **5.3. Limitations**

This study acknowledges several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings:

- a). The research was conducted solely in government colleges in the district of , Pakistan. As such, the findings may not be fully generalizable to other regions with different linguistic, cultural, or educational contexts, particularly those with diverse language policies or higher exposure to English.
- b). Although the study included 65 in-service English teachers, the sample size remains relatively small for broader generalizations. Additionally, the majority of participants were from similar educational backgrounds (M.A. or M.Phil. in English), which may limit the diversity of perspectives, especially those from teachers with different training or teaching experience.
- c). The data collection relied on a survey questionnaire, which is subject to self-reporting biases. Teachers' responses may reflect their perceptions rather than actual classroom practices. The lack of observational data limits the ability to verify the reported use of L1 and its different in real teaching scenarios.
- d). The study primarily focused on the perceptions of ESL teachers and did not include input from students, who are the primary beneficiaries of the teaching strategies. Understanding

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student experiences and attitudes towards the use of L1 could have provided a more holistic view of bilingualism's impact on language learning.

e). The cross-sectional design of the study does not allow for analysis of the long-term effects of bilingual practices on L2 proficiency. Longitudinal research is needed to explore how the strategic use of L1 influences language acquisition over time and to assess its impact on different languages skills (e.g. speaking, listening, reading, and writing).

f). The variability in classroom settings, teaching methodologies, and individual teacher proficiency levels were not controlled for in this study. These factors may have influenced the effectiveness of bilingual strategies, making it challenging to isolate the specific impact of L1 use.

Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into the role of bilingualism in ESL classrooms. Future research should address these constraints by expanding the sample size, incorporating student perspectives, and employing longitudinal designs to gain a deeper understanding of the long-term implications of bilingual practices in language education.

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