



**FIRST LANGUAGE TRANSFER AND ITS ROLE IN ENGLISH LEARNING
AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS: EVIDENCE FROM A
MULTILINGUAL REGION OF INDONESIA**

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Abstract

This study examines the role of first language transfer in English learning among secondary school students in the multilingual context of Bangka Belitung, Indonesia. It responds to continuing debate over whether first language use hinders or supports second language development. Using a qualitative case study design, the research draws on semi-structured interviews with one teacher and ten students from a senior high school in Bangka Island who had participated in an English drama competition and demonstrated strong spoken English ability. The study is interpreted through pedagogical translanguaging, supported by the concepts of languaging and plurilingual pedagogy, which together frame learners' first language as a valuable cognitive and communicative resource. The findings show that first language transfer facilitates comprehension, idea development, confidence, and negotiation of meaning rather than functioning solely as interference. A notable finding is the bridge-and-reformulate pattern, in which learners use their first language as a transitional step before producing English utterances in classroom interaction.

Keywords: Mother tongue, language transfer, English learning, bilingual pedagogy, multilingual education

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INTRODUCTION

The role of students' first language (L1) in English learning has shifted from being treated mainly as interference to being examined as a multilingual resource for meaning-making, participation, and identity work in classroom settings (Prilutskaya, 2021; Turner & Lin, 2024). Recent scholarship argues that multilingual learners do not separate their languages as rigid systems during learning, but instead mobilize their full linguistic repertoires to process input, negotiate meaning, and produce output across tasks and contexts (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021; Bailey et al., 2025). Within this perspective, L1 is no longer viewed only as a barrier to target-language exposure, but also as a cognitive, affective, and interactional resource that can mediate learning when its classroom use is purposeful and pedagogically managed (Prilutskaya, 2021; Bailey et al., 2025). This shift has become especially influential in English language education, where monolingual ideologies are increasingly challenged by multilingual realities in both formal and informal learning spaces (Turner & Lin, 2024; Rahman et al., 2025). As a result, current debates in applied linguistics are less concerned with whether L1 appears in the classroom and more concerned with how it functions, under what conditions it supports learning, and when it may limit target-language development (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021; Sobkowiak, 2022; Sundqvist et al., 2025).

A major line of recent research has been developed through the concept of pedagogical translanguaging, which frames multilingual classroom practice as planned instructional use of learners' linguistic resources rather than spontaneous language mixing alone (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021; Prilutskaya, 2021). This body of work shows that multilingual practices can support comprehension, reduce participation barriers, and create more inclusive classroom environments when teachers integrate them strategically into pedagogy (Decristan et al., 2024; Ulum, 2024). In Germany, for example, translanguaging-oriented instruction has been associated with positive student perceptions of classroom climate and classroom management, suggesting that multilingual pedagogy does not necessarily undermine order or instructional quality (Decristan et al., 2024). Similarly, research in Turkey reports that high school and university learners perceive translanguaging as beneficial for language learning, cultural integration, and academic performance, although the effects may vary across learner groups and contexts (Ulum, 2024). Systematic review evidence also indicates that the field has expanded rapidly, yet still needs more context-sensitive empirical studies that connect multilingual theory with specific classroom practices and learner outcomes (Prilutskaya, 2021; Turner & Lin, 2024). The issue is especially

relevant in secondary education because adolescence is a stage in which learners are expected to move beyond basic comprehension toward more sustained academic speaking, reasoning, and self-expression in English (Bailey et al., 2025; Zhang, 2024). At this level, students often rely on prior linguistic knowledge to formulate ideas, regulate emotions, and maintain confidence while performing cognitively demanding tasks in the target language (Zhang, 2024; Robillos, 2023).

Recent studies in EFL contexts have shown that multilingual scaffolding can support listening comprehension, participation, and communicative competence, particularly when teachers allow controlled movement between familiar and target languages (Robillos, 2023; Sobkowiak, 2022). At the same time, scholars continue to warn that unstructured or excessive dependence on L1 may reduce opportunities for sustained target-language practice if no pedagogical transition toward English is built into classroom routines (Sobkowiak, 2022; Sundqvist et al., 2025). Accordingly, the educational question is not simply whether learners use L1, but how L1 use intersects with thinking, confidence, rehearsal, and eventual English performance in classroom interaction (Bailey et al., 2025; Zhang, 2024; Turner & Lin, 2024). This debate is particularly significant in Indonesia, where English is learned in linguistically layered classrooms shaped by local languages, Bahasa Indonesia, and diverse sociocultural norms of communication (Liando et al., 2023; Sukyadi, 2023). Recent Indonesian research shows that teachers often draw flexibly on English, Indonesian, and local languages to clarify meaning, support interaction, and maintain student engagement, even when English remains the stated target language of instruction (Liando et al., 2023; Rasmin et al., 2024). Studies from Indonesian secondary settings also indicate that multilingual practices can make materials more accessible and culturally meaningful, especially when teachers adapt content to students' lived experiences and linguistic backgrounds (Hanifa et al., 2024; Rasmin et al., 2024). However, Indonesian evidence also suggests that reliance on familiar languages can become problematic when classroom tasks do not clearly push students back toward formal academic language or English production (Hanifa et al., 2024; Sukyadi, 2023). These tensions make Indonesia an important context for investigating how L1 transfer actually operates in English learning processes rather than assuming either a wholly negative or wholly positive role for L1 in EFL classrooms (Liando et al., 2023; Sukyadi, 2023; Rasmin et al., 2024).

Although recent scholarship has advanced multilingual perspectives in language education, much of the literature has focused on broad conceptual discussions, teacher beliefs, or higher education contexts rather than on the micro-processes through which

secondary students convert L1-mediated thinking into English performance (Prilutskaya, 2021; Rahman & Hu, 2025; Turner & Lin, 2024). A substantial portion of recent work examines ideology, classroom policy, or general perceptions of translanguaging, which is valuable but does not fully explain how learners cognitively and interactionally use L1 while learning English in day-to-day school practice (Rahman et al., 2025; Sundqvist et al., 2025). For example, studies on multilingual policy in EMI and higher education reveal persistent tensions between institutional English-only expectations and actual classroom meaning-making, but these findings cannot simply be transferred to secondary EFL settings (Rahman & Hu, 2025; Rahman et al., 2025). Likewise, research on identity and integration among multilingual graduate students has enriched understanding of translanguaging as social and academic negotiation, yet it addresses learners whose institutional demands and proficiency profiles differ markedly from school-aged EFL students (Almashour, 2024; Turner & Lin, 2024). Thus, there remains a need for studies that focus directly on secondary English learning as a process in which L1 may function simultaneously as scaffold, rehearsal space, and possible source of dependency (Bailey et al., 2025; Sobkowiak, 2022). A second limitation is that many recent studies emphasize teacher perceptions or general student attitudes rather than the experiences of learners who already demonstrate relatively strong English performance and can therefore illuminate more advanced forms of L1-mediated processing (Rasmin et al., 2024; Ulum, 2024). This matters because students with stronger oral English may still rely on L1 internally for planning, semantic organization, or confidence regulation, even when their outward performance appears fluent in English (Zhang, 2024; Almashour, 2024). Yet recent literature rarely isolates such learners in order to understand how L1 continues to shape their English learning processes beyond beginner-level comprehension problems (Bailey et al., 2025; Robillos, 2023). In addition, the literature remains uneven in its coverage of peripheral and underrepresented multilingual regions, with Indonesian evidence still concentrated in selected classrooms, teacher accounts, or broad discussions of classroom multilingualism (Liando et al., 2023; Hanifa et al., 2024; Rasmin et al., 2024). Consequently, regions such as Bangka Belitung remain insufficiently represented in internationally visible discussions of multilingual English learning at the secondary level (Liando et al., 2023; Rasmin et al., 2024; Sukyadi, 2023).

Against this background, the present study investigates first language transfer and its role in English learning among secondary school students in the Bangka Belitung region of Indonesia, a multilingual setting that remains underrepresented in recent international discussions of secondary EFL pedagogy. More specifically, the study examines how L1

shapes students' comprehension, idea formation, classroom participation, and oral English learning in a secondary school context where English achievement cannot be understood apart from multilingual experience. This study seeks to contribute to multilingual English education in three ways: by extending empirical evidence from an underrepresented Indonesian region, by centering secondary learners with demonstrated oral English ability, and by refining how L1 transfer is understood in relation to English learning processes. The study therefore positions Bangka Belitung not as a merely local case, but as a meaningful site from which broader insights can be drawn about English learning in multilingual secondary education across the Global South and comparable peripheral contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

First Language Transfer and Pedagogical Translanguaging

The discussion of first language (L1) in English learning has shifted significantly in recent years. Earlier perspectives in second language acquisition often positioned L1 as a source of interference that obstructed target-language development. However, more recent scholarship has challenged this deficit view by showing that multilingual learners do not learn English in isolation from their prior linguistic knowledge. Instead, they use their available linguistic repertoire to understand instructions, interpret content, generate ideas, and participate in classroom interaction (Cenoz & Gorter, 2020; Prilutskaya, 2021; Turner & Lin, 2024). In this study, the interpretation of L1 transfer draws on García and Li (2014)'s perspective, particularly the view that multilingual learners make meaning through flexible use of their linguistic resources rather than through strict separation of named languages. From this perspective, L1 is not merely a fixed background system that influences English learning externally, but an active part of students' sense-making processes in multilingual classrooms (Bonacina-Pugh et al., 2021; Turner & Lin, 2024). This framework is especially relevant for EFL contexts, where students frequently move between English, the national language, and local languages while engaging in classroom tasks.

This perspective is also closely linked to the concept of pedagogical translanguaging. Cenoz and Gorter (2020) describe pedagogical translanguaging as the planned use of learners' full linguistic repertoire for teaching and learning purposes. Similarly, Prilutskaya (2021), in her systematic review, found that translanguaging has become an important framework in language education because it recognizes multilingualism as a pedagogical resource rather than a classroom problem. Studies conducted in different educational settings show that the strategic use of L1 can facilitate comprehension, encourage participation, and lower affective barriers in language learning

(Huang & Chalmers, 2023; Wang, 2022). Nevertheless, recent research also stresses that translanguaging should not be idealized uncritically. Huang and Chalmers (2023) found that although pedagogical translanguaging often produces positive outcomes, the empirical evidence remains uneven and context dependent. Sobkowiak (2022) similarly argues that the success of multilingual classroom practice depends largely on how teachers' structure and manage the relationship between L1 and the target language. From this angle, L1 transfer should not be seen as automatically beneficial. Its value depends on whether it functions as a scaffold toward English learning or becomes a substitute for English practice. Therefore, the key issue is not simply whether L1 is present in the classroom, but how it is pedagogically mediated and transformed into learning opportunities (Bonacina-Pugh et al., 2021; Turner & Lin, 2024).

For the present study, this body of literature provides an important conceptual foundation. It suggests that first language transfer in English learning should be examined not only in terms of linguistic interference, but also in relation to cognition, interaction, and pedagogy. In other words, L1 may function as a bridge for processing meaning, planning ideas, and negotiating classroom tasks before students are able to express themselves fully in English.

L1 Use in Secondary English Learning

The role of L1 is especially important in secondary education, where students are expected to engage in more complex cognitive and communicative tasks in English. Adolescents are not merely learning isolated words or grammatical forms; they are learning to explain, respond, perform, and present ideas in ways that require confidence, planning, and sustained classroom participation (Bailey et al., 2025). In such contexts, L1 often plays a significant role in supporting learners' thinking processes before they produce English output. Recent studies indicate that multilingual pedagogies can support adolescent learners in several ways. Bailey et al. (2025) argues that translanguaging should be understood as part of equity-oriented instruction because multilingual learners need opportunities to use all their linguistic resources while developing academic competence. This is particularly relevant in secondary school settings, where classroom participation and oral performance are often shaped by students' confidence and ability to formulate ideas. Ulum (2024) found that both secondary and university learners tend to view translanguaging positively, particularly in relation to comprehension, classroom engagement, and confidence in language use. Likewise, Decristan et al. (2024) showed that translanguaging-informed instruction can contribute positively to classroom climate and classroom management,

suggesting that multilingual practice does not necessarily undermine discipline or learning quality. At the same time, the literature also shows that there are unresolved tensions in how teachers and students perceive L1 use in English classrooms. Sundqvist et al. (2025) found that secondary-school English teachers often recognize multilingualism as a resource, but their views vary considerably regarding how much L1 should be permitted. Some teachers consider it supportive, while others worry that it may reduce exposure to English and weaken students' target-language habits. This tension reflects a broader pedagogical dilemma: students may need L1 to build understanding and confidence, yet excessive or unstructured dependence on L1 may limit opportunities for practice in English.

This debate becomes even more important when considering students who already show relatively strong English performance. Much of the existing literature discusses L1 support for beginners or struggling learners, but less attention has been paid to students who appear fluent in English while still relying on L1 internally for planning, interpretation, or confidence regulation. This is a significant gap, because fluent English performance does not necessarily mean that L1 has disappeared from the learning process. Learners may still conceptualize ideas in L1, rehearse mentally through familiar linguistic forms, or negotiate meaning through code-shifting before producing English speech. Therefore, examining students who demonstrate oral fluency may reveal a more nuanced form of first language transfer than studies focused only on basic comprehension problems. For this reason, secondary education provides an important site for investigating how L1 shapes English learning processes. It allows researchers to move beyond the simplistic assumption that L1 use is either harmful or helpful, and instead examine how it interacts with speaking performance, classroom participation, and academic language development.

Multilingual EFL Contexts in Indonesia and the Research Gap

The Indonesian context is particularly relevant to this discussion because English learning occurs in a highly multilingual society. Students often learn English through the mediation of Bahasa Indonesia as the national language, while also drawing on local languages that remain important in everyday communication. Recent studies confirm that this multilingual reality is central to classroom practice. Liando et al. (2023) found that English teaching in Indonesia often involves movement among English, Bahasa Indonesia, and local language resources, reflecting the fluid and layered character of classroom communication. Sukyadi (2023) also showed that L1 is present not only in spoken interaction but also in English learning materials, where it supports students' access to meaning and content. Research in Indonesian rural and secondary settings further highlights

the pedagogical importance of multilingual resources. Rasmin et al. (2024) reported that teachers in rural EFL classrooms perceive translanguaging as helpful for explanation, interaction, and student engagement. Hanifa et al. (2024) likewise demonstrated that contextualized and adapted EFL materials have positive effects on Indonesian secondary students' language learning. These findings suggest that English instruction in Indonesia is rarely monolingual in practice, even if monolingual ideology may still influence policy or classroom expectations. However, there are still important gaps in the existing literature. First, many studies in Indonesia focus on teachers' perceptions or on general classroom practice, rather than on how students themselves experience first language transfer during English learning. Second, although multilingual practices have been observed in Indonesian classrooms, fewer studies have examined how L1 functions specifically in the learning processes of students who already demonstrate relatively strong spoken English. Third, peripheral multilingual regions such as Bangka Belitung remain underrepresented in internationally visible scholarship, despite offering important insights into how English learning unfolds outside metropolitan or heavily researched educational centers.

This study addresses these gaps by examining first language transfer in the English learning processes of secondary school students in Bangka Belitung. By focusing on students who participated in an English drama competition and demonstrated fluency in spoken English, the study investigates how L1 continues to operate even among learners who appear successful in English performance. In doing so, it extends the literature beyond teacher belief studies and beyond beginner-level accounts of L1 support. It also contributes to the growing body of research that views multilingual resources as pedagogically meaningful, while still recognizing the need for structured transitions toward English production. Overall, the literature suggests that first language transfer in English learning should be understood as a complex phenomenon located at the intersection of cognition, pedagogy, and multilingual classroom practice. Guided by García and Lin's perspective, this study therefore examines L1 not simply as interference, but as a mediated resource whose role in secondary English learning deserves closer empirical attention.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine the role of first language transfer in English learning among secondary school students in the multilingual context of Bangka Belitung, Indonesia. A qualitative approach was selected because the study sought to understand in depth how students and a teacher perceived and experienced

the use of first language resources in English learning, particularly in relation to comprehension, idea construction, classroom participation, and oral performance. Rather than measuring language transfer statistically, this study aimed to explore the meanings, strategies, and processes underlying learners' language practices in a naturally occurring educational setting. In this sense, the study was interpretive in orientation and focused on how participants made sense of their own multilingual learning experiences. The choice of case study was appropriate because the research investigated a bounded case: a specific group of students from one senior high school in Bangka Island, Indonesia, together with one English teacher working in that setting. The case was bounded by place, participant group, and educational experience. It was also bounded by the shared characteristic that the student participants had already taken part in an English drama competition organized by a university in Bangka Island and had demonstrated notable fluency in spoken English. This made the case especially valuable, as it allowed the researchers to examine first language transfer not only among beginners or struggling learners, but also among students who had already shown relatively strong oral English performance. Through this design, the study was able to capture the complexity of multilingual language learning in a specific regional context and to generate context-sensitive insights into how first language use functions in English learning processes.

Research Site and Participants

The study was conducted at one senior high school in Bangka Island, Indonesia, located within the multilingual region of Bangka Belitung. This setting was chosen purposively because it reflects the linguistic complexity of Indonesian secondary education, where students commonly navigate local languages, Bahasa Indonesia, and English in their daily academic and social lives. Such a context provides a meaningful site for examining how first language transfer operates in English learning, especially in a region that remains underrepresented in international discussions of multilingual education. The participants consisted of eleven individuals, namely one English teacher and ten students. The teacher was selected because of direct involvement in teaching English and in guiding students in English-related activities. The student participants were selected purposively based on two criteria: first, they were enrolled in the selected senior high school; and second, they had participated in an English drama competition organized by one of the universities in Bangka Island and had demonstrated fluency in spoken English. These criteria were important because the study aimed to understand how first language transfer continues to operate even among students who appear successful in spoken English. Their experiences were expected

to provide rich information on the cognitive and interactional roles of first language use beyond elementary-level language difficulties.

Data Collection

The primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews. This method was chosen because it allowed the researchers to explore participants' experiences in detail while still maintaining focus on the main issues of the study. Semi-structured interviews are particularly suitable for qualitative case studies because they enable participants to explain their perspectives in their own words and allow the researcher to probe emerging themes during the interaction. Separate interview guides were prepared for the teacher and the students. The teacher interview focused on classroom language practices, perceptions of students' language use, strategies for managing multilingual interaction, and views on the role of first language in English learning. The student interviews focused on how they used their first language when learning English, whether they relied on it to understand materials or formulate ideas, how it affected their confidence, and how they moved from first-language thinking into English speaking. Additional attention was given to their experience in English drama activities, as these performance-based tasks provided insight into rehearsal, memorization, negotiation of meaning, and oral language production. The interviews were conducted in a flexible manner so that participants could respond comfortably and provide detailed answers. Where necessary, participants were allowed to use Bahasa Indonesia or other familiar linguistic resources to express their ideas clearly. This was consistent with the multilingual orientation of the study and ensured that the data reflected authentic experiences rather than forced monolingual performance. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis, informed by the interpretive lens of pedagogical translanguaging, particularly as developed by García and Li Wei. Within this framework, learners' first language is not treated simply as interference or deficiency, but as a meaningful semiotic and cognitive resource that supports participation, comprehension, and language production in multilingual settings. This perspective was especially relevant to the present study because the aim was not to identify language errors alone, but to understand how students strategically mobilized their first language in the process of learning and performing English. The analysis began with repeated reading of the interview transcripts to gain familiarity with the data. The researchers then conducted initial coding, identifying segments related to recurring experiences such as understanding

instructions, clarifying meaning, building confidence, planning speech, rehearsing ideas, and shifting from first language to English. These initial codes were then grouped into broader themes that represented patterns across participant accounts.

At the interpretive stage, the researchers examined these themes through García and Li (2014)'s view of translanguaging as the dynamic use of learners' full linguistic repertoire. This meant that student reports of "thinking first in Indonesian or local language," "testing ideas in the first language," or "using the first language before answering in English" were interpreted not merely as evidence of dependency, but as multilingual meaning-making practices. The concept of languaging also supported the analysis, especially in understanding how students used language to mediate thought before speaking. In addition, the study drew on plurilingual pedagogy, which recognizes that multilingual learners' competencies are integrated rather than compartmentalized. Through this interpretive process, the analysis identified what the study terms a bridge-and-reformulate pattern, in which students used their first language as a transitional bridge before reformulating their ideas into English utterances.

Research Procedure

The research procedure was conducted in several stages. First, the researchers identified the research focus and selected the school context that was most relevant to the study's objective. Second, the researchers gained access to the research site and identified participants who met the purposive sampling criteria. Third, interview protocols were designed based on the study's research questions and theoretical orientation. These protocols were developed to elicit information about language use, learning strategies, classroom participation, and oral performance. Fourth, the researchers conducted the interviews with the teacher and the ten students. During this stage, the researchers maintained flexibility in questioning while ensuring that all major themes were covered. Fifth, the audio recordings were transcribed and organized systematically. Sixth, the researchers coded the transcripts, generated themes, and interpreted them in relation to pedagogical translanguaging, languaging, and plurilingual perspectives. Finally, the findings were synthesized in order to explain how first language transfer functioned in the participants' English learning processes and what implications this held for multilingual pedagogy in secondary education.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, several qualitative strategies were applied. First, the inclusion of both teacher and student perspectives enabled data

triangulation, allowing the study to compare how multilingual practices were understood from different positions within the same educational setting. Second, the researchers engaged in repeated reading of the transcripts and careful coding to maintain consistency in interpretation. Third, direct alignment was maintained between the data, the emerging themes, and the theoretical lens, so that the interpretation remained grounded in participant accounts rather than imposed by abstraction alone. These strategies strengthened the credibility and coherence of the analysis. Ethical considerations were observed throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage. Consent was obtained prior to data collection, and confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing the identities of the school, teacher, and students in the research report. The data were used solely for academic purposes, and the interview process was conducted in a manner that respected participant comfort and privacy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

First language as a cognitive scaffold and language of thought

A central finding of this study is that first language transfer functioned primarily as a cognitive scaffold in students' English learning rather than as a simple source of linguistic interference. Across the interview data, the teacher emphasized that students processed new content more effectively when they were first allowed to anchor meaning in a familiar language. This suggests that the students' first language was not merely a communication tool, but a language of thought through which they organized understanding before attempting English production. This pattern is consistent with recent work on pedagogical translanguaging, which shows that multilingual learners often mobilize their full linguistic repertoire to interpret input, construct meaning, and manage cognitively demanding tasks in classroom interaction (Bailey et al., 2025; Cenoz & Gorter, 2020; Turner & Lin, 2024).

Teacher excerpt (adapted translation):

“The mother tongue has a very strong influence on how students absorb the lesson because that is the language they use every day. It is also the language they use to think. When they understand the idea first in their own language, they can follow the lesson more easily.”

This teacher account is reinforced by the student data, especially in the way students described their internal learning process. Even though the student participants had demonstrated relatively strong spoken English ability through their participation in an English drama competition, they still reported relying on Bahasa Indonesia or the local

Bangka language as an intermediate stage of understanding. Their fluency in spoken English therefore did not eliminate L1 involvement; instead, L1 remained active at the level of conceptualization and rehearsal.

Student excerpt 1 (adapted translation):

“When I hear a difficult explanation in English, I usually understand it first in Indonesian in my head. After I get the meaning, I can say it again in English.”

Student excerpt 2 (adapted translation):

“Sometimes I already know what I want to say, but the sentence comes first in Bahasa or in Bangka. Then I translate or fix it little by little into English.”

These accounts support the view that L1 transfer in this context operated as languaging, that is, as a process through which learners used familiar language resources to mediate thought before producing a more formal utterance (Robillos, 2023; Zhang, 2024). From a translanguaging perspective, such movement across languages should not be reduced to deficiency. Rather, it reflects how multilingual learners draw on integrated linguistic resources to construct understanding in real time (Bonacina-Pugh et al., 2021; Turner & Lin, 2024). The present finding is especially significant because it comes from students who were already able to perform orally in English. This extends previous studies that often focus on beginners or struggling learners and shows that even relatively fluent adolescents continue to think through L1-supported processes when learning English (Bailey et al., 2025; Ulum, 2024). At the same time, the data suggest that the role of L1 as a cognitive scaffold was strongest at the stage of initial comprehension and idea formation. Students did not report remaining in L1 throughout the learning task. Instead, L1 appeared to operate as a preliminary interpretive space from which English output could later emerge. This is important because it indicates that L1 transfer in this study was not simply a replacement for English. Rather, it functioned as a preparatory phase that supported deeper comprehension and more confident participation. This finding aligns with research showing that multilingual scaffolding can improve access to content and reduce the cognitive overload associated with immediate target-language performance (Huang & Chalmers, 2023; Sobkowiak, 2022).

First language, confidence, and negotiation of meaning

A second major finding is that first language transfer also worked as an affective and interactional resource, particularly in building confidence and enabling negotiation of meaning. The interviews suggest that students did not use L1 only because of lexical limitation; they also used it to reduce hesitation, confirm understanding with peers, and

stabilize their ideas before speaking publicly in English. This is especially visible in collaborative and performance-oriented contexts such as group preparation and drama practice.

Student excerpt 3 (adapted translation):

“If I speak directly in English all the time, sometimes I become nervous because I am afraid of making mistakes. But when I can discuss first in Indonesian, I become more confident and then I can speak English better.”

Student excerpt 4 (adapted translation):

“During drama practice, we often talked first in our own language to make sure everyone understood the scene. After that, we practised the English lines.”

These excerpts show that L1 served as a confidence-building mechanism that supported participation rather than undermined it. This finding resonates with studies suggesting that translanguaging may reduce anxiety, strengthen classroom engagement, and create a more inclusive communicative environment for multilingual learners (Decristan et al., 2024; Ulum, 2024; Wang, 2022). In this study, the use of L1 appeared to lower the psychological pressure of immediate English production, especially when students were preparing meaning collaboratively. This is important in secondary education, where oral performance is closely tied to peer evaluation, self-confidence, and emotional regulation (Bailey et al., 2025; Zhang, 2024). The teacher’s account also supports this affective dimension. Rather than treating L1 use as a disciplinary problem, the teacher regarded it as a practical resource that could keep communication flowing when students struggled to express ideas.

Teacher excerpt (adapted translation):

“If students are completely blocked, I let them explain briefly in their own language first. The important thing is that they do not stop thinking. After that, I ask them to say it again in Indonesian or in English, depending on the task.”

This response reflects a pedagogical stance in which L1 use is tolerated not as a permanent alternative to English, but as a means of keeping students cognitively and socially engaged. Such a stance is compatible with current multilingual pedagogy, which argues that participation and meaning-making often require flexible use of familiar languages, especially in contexts where learners are still developing target-language confidence (Prilutskaya, 2021; Rasmin et al., 2024). In the present case, the students’ use of L1 during peer interaction appears to have facilitated negotiation of meaning, allowing them to test interpretations, confirm task understanding, and coordinate performance before

producing English utterances. This interactional role of L1 has also been observed in Indonesian and other EFL settings, where classroom multilingualism often supports explanation, collaboration, and engagement (Liando et al., 2023; Rasmin et al., 2024; Sobkowiak, 2022). What is especially notable here is that L1-assisted negotiation was reported among students who were considered fluent speakers of English in school-level performance contexts. This suggests that fluency should not be equated with monolingual processing. Even students who appear successful in English may still depend on multilingual meaning-making at earlier stages of rehearsal and conceptual organization. The finding therefore challenges simplistic assumptions that stronger English learners no longer need L1 support. Instead, it points to a more nuanced understanding in which L1 remains part of high-performing students' communicative preparation, especially in demanding oral tasks.

The bridge-and-reformulate pattern as a pedagogical sequence

The most distinctive finding of this study is the emergence of what may be termed a bridge-and-reformulate pattern. In this pattern, students first used L1 to clarify, test, or stabilize meaning, and were then guided by the teacher to restate the idea in a more formal language, especially Bahasa Indonesia for academic classroom exchange and English for language learning tasks. This finding is important because it offers a more specific account of how first language transfer operates in classroom practice. Rather than simply documenting that students used L1, the study identifies a sequenced movement from L1-supported comprehension to reformulated output.

Teacher excerpt (adapted translation):

“When they cannot explain something clearly, I allow them to use Bangka or Indonesian for a short clarification. But I do not stop there. I ask them to reformulate it, especially in formal classroom situations, so they learn how to express the same idea properly.”

Student excerpt 5 (adapted translation):

“Usually I start from what is easiest for me to understand. After that, the teacher asks me to say it again more formally. So I move from what I know first, then I make it better in English.”

This pattern offers a valuable refinement of existing literature. Previous studies have shown that translanguaging can facilitate understanding and participation, but fewer studies specify the micro-sequence through which students move from familiar language resources into target-language performance in secondary EFL classrooms (Huang & Chalmers, 2023;

Turner & Lin, 2024). The present study contributes by showing that, in this Bangka Belitung case, L1 use was not left unstructured. It was pedagogically transformed into a staged transition. This is where the novelty of the study lies: the contribution is not the general claim that students use their first language, which is already established, but the identification of a patterned instructional movement in which L1 operates as a bridge, not as a final destination. This finding is theoretically meaningful because it aligns with pedagogical translanguaging while also addressing concerns about overdependence on L1. Research has repeatedly warned that multilingual practices need careful mediation so that students are not left without sufficient opportunities for English development (Huang & Chalmers, 2023; Sundqvist et al., 2025). The bridge-and-reformulate pattern addresses this tension directly. It validates students' multilingual resources at the stage of understanding, but it also maintains a clear expectation that meaning must later be re-expressed in a more academic or target-language form. In this sense, the teacher's strategy can be interpreted as a form of plurilingual pedagogy that treats languages as interconnected resources while still preserving developmental goals for school language and English learning (Bailey et al., 2025; Cenoz & Gorter, 2020).

The role of Bahasa Indonesia in this sequence is also important. The data show that the teacher often required reformulation into Bahasa Indonesia for formal classroom discourse, especially because the teacher was not a speaker of the local Bangka language. This added an intermediate layer to the multilingual ecology of the classroom: local language supported immediate comfort and peer coordination, Bahasa Indonesia served as a shared academic medium, and English remained the ultimate language-learning target. This layered finding deepens Indonesian EFL scholarship by showing that classroom multilingualism in peripheral regions is not merely bilingual but stratified, with different languages serving different pedagogical functions (Liando et al., 2023; Sukyadi, 2023).

Boundaries, risks, and implications for multilingual pedagogy

Although the findings strongly support the constructive role of L1 transfer, the data also reveal an important tension: unrestricted L1 use may limit the development of formal academic language habits. The teacher explicitly noted that because L1 is more familiar and easier for students, its continuous use in formal settings may reduce students' practice in Bahasa Indonesia and English. This indicates that the pedagogical value of L1 depends on boundaries and purpose.

Teacher excerpt (adapted translation):

“The local language helps them understand faster, but if it is used all the time in

formal learning, students become too comfortable and do not get used to speaking in the academic language that the classroom needs.”

This concern echoes broader multilingual education research, which argues that L1 use is productive only when it is strategically managed rather than indiscriminately expanded to all classroom functions (Huang & Chalmers, 2023; Sobkowiak, 2022; Sundqvist et al., 2025). In the present study, the teacher addressed this risk by setting different expectations for different activities: L1 could be used during internal group coordination or quick clarification, but more formal reporting and presentation required Bahasa Indonesia or English. Such differentiation appears pedagogically effective because it preserves communicative comfort while still creating pressure for students to develop formal expressive competence. From the student perspective, this balance was also recognized. Some students implicitly acknowledged that L1 was helpful at the beginning of the process but that English still required repeated practice.

Student excerpt 6 (adapted translation):

“Using Indonesian or Bangka helps me understand, but if I want to be fluent in English, I still need to practise saying it in English many times.”

This statement suggests that the students themselves did not view L1 and English as contradictory. Rather, they perceived them as serving different purposes within the same learning process. This supports a non-binary view of multilingual pedagogy: learners can value L1 as a support resource while still recognizing the necessity of sustained English practice. For teaching practice, this means that the pedagogical question is not whether to ban or allow L1 absolutely, but how to create structured multilingual routines that move students from comprehension to reformulation and performance.

The findings indicate that first language transfer in this context is best understood as a managed multilingual resource. It facilitates comprehension, idea development, confidence, and negotiation of meaning, yet it requires pedagogical direction to ensure that students continue to develop formal academic language and English-speaking ability. The study therefore supports recent scholarship that challenges English-only assumptions while also warning against unstructured multilingualism (Bailey et al., 2025; Decristan et al., 2024; Turner & Lin, 2024). More specifically, the Bangka Belitung case contributes a nuanced insight: even among relatively fluent secondary-school English learners, L1 remains central to cognition and interaction, but its most productive role emerges when it is embedded in a bridge-and-reformulate sequence. This finding offers a concrete contribution to multilingual EFL pedagogy in Indonesia and comparable peripheral settings, where local

language, national language, and English coexist in layered and dynamic ways.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine the role of first language transfer in English learning among secondary school students in a multilingual region of Indonesia, with particular attention to how first language resources shape comprehension, idea development, classroom participation, and oral English performance. By focusing on one teacher and ten students who had participated in an English drama competition and demonstrated strong spoken English ability, the study sought to understand first language transfer not only among beginner learners but also among students who appeared relatively fluent in English. The findings show that first language transfer plays a constructive role in English learning. Rather than functioning solely as interference, the first language served as a cognitive scaffold, a language of thought, a confidence-building resource, and a tool for negotiating meaning. A notable finding is the emergence of a bridge-and-reformulate pattern, in which students first relied on their first language to clarify or organize meaning and were then guided to restate their ideas in Bahasa Indonesia or English. This finding suggests that first language use can support English learning when it is strategically mediated rather than left unstructured. The study implies that multilingual pedagogy in secondary English classrooms should move beyond rigid English-only assumptions. Teachers need classroom strategies that recognize students' first language as a legitimate learning resource while still maintaining clear pathways toward English production and academic language development. This also points to the need for teacher training and classroom language policies that support balanced and purposeful multilingual practice. However, this study has several limitations. It was based on a small-scale qualitative case study involving one school, one teacher, and a limited number of students in a specific regional context. The findings, therefore, cannot be generalized broadly. Future research could involve more schools, a larger number of participants, and additional data sources such as classroom observation and student performance data. Comparative studies across multilingual regions would also be valuable to test whether the bridge-and-reformulate pattern appears in other English learning contexts.

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