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Exploring Kurdish Learners' and Teachers' Perspectives on the Strategic Use of the Mother Tongue in EFL Classrooms

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Abstract

This study explores how Kurdish learners and English teachers understand and use the mother tongue in EFL lessons at Gasha Educational Community. Using a qualitative design, the study draws on semi-structured interviews with 16 students in Grades 4–7 and three English teachers, alongside classroom observations. The interview data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns in participants' accounts. The findings revealed that Kurdish can help learners understand difficult vocabulary and grammar, feel less anxious, and express cultural identity. However, participants also described how frequent reliance on Kurdish may reduce opportunities to practice English. By bringing student and teacher perspectives together in one school context, the study offers a context-specific account of how L1 can operate both as a learning resource and as a potential constraint. The findings support a flexible approach in which Kurdish is used purposefully to clarify meaning and support participation, while classroom tasks continue to prioritize English use. Future research, including experimental designs, is needed to directly measure the effects of this approach on Kurdish school-age learners' language development, anxiety, identity, and proficiency, which this study examined only through participants' perceptions.

Keywords: mother tongue; EFL classrooms; Kurdish learners; translanguaging; teacher perspectives; qualitative study

Introduction

The use of the mother tongue, or first language (L1), in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms remains debated. One position holds that sustained exposure to English is a condition for developing communicative competence. Another recognizes that learners may need familiar linguistic resources to understand instructions, discuss difficult concepts, and take part with confidence. These positions are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The pedagogical issue is how teachers can accommodate learners' existing linguistic resources without letting them replace meaningful English practice. This question is

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especially relevant in EFL settings where learners may have few opportunities to use English outside school (Adekola et al., 2018).

Research has therefore described both enabling and constraining effects of L1 use. Strategic use may support comprehension and reduce anxiety. Habitual translation or dependence on L1, by contrast, can limit exposure to English and contribute to negative transfer (Khati, 2011; Zhao, 2019). Recent work on translanguaging has extended this debate by examining how learners draw on their full linguistic repertoires to make meaning and participate in classroom activity. Studies in EFL contexts have reported that flexible language practices can support comprehension and engagement. These studies also stress the need to maintain opportunities for target-language production (Liando et al., 2023; Minerva & Gunawan, 2025; Ramadhani & Maharsi, 2024). Therefore, the value of L1 depends not simply on whether it is used, but on its purpose, timing, and the classroom expectations surrounding its use.

This balance matters in the Kurdistan Region, particularly in private schools in Sulaimani. There, English is commonly learned mainly in the classroom, and opportunities for authentic communication outside school may be limited. Kurdish can give learners a familiar resource for explaining unfamiliar language and negotiating meaning. At the same time, teachers must ensure that such support does not reduce learners' opportunities to formulate and communicate ideas in English. For this reason, both student experiences and teacher decisions need to be examined to understand how language practices are negotiated in a specific educational setting. Previous studies have examined L1 use, code-switching, and translanguaging in a range of EFL settings. However, they do not fully explain how younger Kurdish learners' accounts align with their teachers' classroom judgments in this particular school context.

The role of the mother tongue in foreign language learning is complex, because it can both help and hinder learning. On the supportive side, learning through the mother tongue promotes cognitive development and emotional security. Yusuf (2009) argues that first-language instruction is faster, more effective, and deeper, and that it helps learners build strong conceptual frameworks that transfer across languages. Noormohamadi (2008) similarly describes how the mother tongue aids the development of cognitive and intellectual capacities that support lifelong learning. In EFL classrooms, the mother tongue can bridge learning for students. Silvani (2014) notes that strategic use of the mother tongue can speed up acquisition and help students grasp complex ideas more efficiently. This is particularly useful in group discussions, where it eases communication, idea exchange, and shared meaning-making. Kasim et al. (2019) add that L1 can clarify instructions, reduce misunderstandings, and support pronunciation practice.

Excessive reliance on the mother tongue, however, may reduce opportunities for immersion and hinder the natural acquisition of English. Overuse of Kurdish, for example, may discourage learners from thinking directly in English and reinforce habits of constant translation. This can slow progress toward fluency and weaken students' confidence in communicating spontaneously in English (Yusuf

et al., 2021). L1 transfer is particularly evident in writing tasks, where students often apply Kurdish syntactic or lexical patterns incorrectly in English. Work on Kurdish EFL learners has likewise described mother-tongue interference as a challenge for grammar and vocabulary learning. That work also recognizes that comparing the two languages can help learners notice differences in form and meaning (Mekael & Muhammed, 2023). The influence of L1 is therefore not uniform. The same resource may help learners understand a concept at one moment and, at another, become a substitute for English practice. While the mother tongue provides emotional and cognitive support, it may also create long-term challenges if teachers do not manage it carefully.

Studies of learners' views give useful but not entirely uniform accounts of L1 use. Sa'd and Qadermazi (2015) found that learners valued L1, particularly for clarifying instructions and complex concepts. In contrast, Resmini (2019) reported that some learners preferred English-only instruction but still recognized the usefulness of L1 when content was difficult. These findings suggest that learners' stated preferences may differ from the practical choices they make when they need clarification.

Research on teachers' views and classroom interaction similarly highlights the importance of instructional context. Yuvayapan (2019) reported that teachers held differing positions on translanguaging. Supporters stressed its usefulness in including learners with lower proficiency and encouraging participation. Classroom observations show that other languages remain present even where English dominates. Brevik and Rindal (2020) observed sixty EFL lessons in Norway. They found that English dominated classroom interaction (77% of the time), but students still used their mother tongue in 16% of exchanges, particularly when clarification or classroom management was needed. Beers Fägersten (2012) likewise observed Swedish EFL classrooms where English was the expected medium of instruction. Students there still turned to Swedish occasionally to maintain comfort and comprehension.

More recent studies have examined translanguaging as a deliberate or emerging classroom practice. Källkvist et al. (2022) interviewed multilingual students in Sweden. These learners used different languages strategically, including Arabic, Kurmanji, and Sorani, depending on the task, their proficiency level, and the context. The students also reported that their teacher's use of the local language, Swedish, helped them connect vocabulary across languages and compare linguistic structures. This shows that teacher practices directly shaped students' engagement with multiple languages. In an Indonesian EFL classroom, Liando et al. (2023) identified several translanguaging practices that teachers used to explain material and support understanding. Ramadhani and Maharsi (2024) described code-switching, translation, and interpretation as resources for clarifying instructions and learning content. Minerva and Gunawan (2025) found that students associated translanguaging with better comprehension and confidence. However, concerns about overreliance on L1 were also noted. These studies differ in setting, participant age, and research design, and they do not directly represent Kurdish primary and lower-secondary learners. Therefore, their findings should not be treated as

interchangeable. Even so, they provide a useful basis for comparison and confirm the need to examine both the benefits and the limits of flexible language use.

Taken together, the literature points to a practical tension rather than a simple choice between permitting and prohibiting the mother tongue. Research increasingly highlights the role of context, learner proficiency, task demands, and the teacher's instructional purpose. An English-only approach can create more opportunities to hear and produce English. However, it may leave some learners without enough support when instructions or concepts are difficult. L1 can provide immediate clarification, yet unplanned or continuous use may reduce time for target-language practice. It can provide temporary scaffolding when learners encounter unfamiliar vocabulary, grammar, or instructions. Clarification in a familiar language may help learners re-enter an English-language task, but repeatedly substituting Kurdish for English can narrow their opportunities to practice the target language. The evidence therefore suggests that a balanced, context-sensitive approach is most effective. In such an approach, L1 is neither overused nor prohibited; teachers use it strategically to support learning and guide learners back toward English production. Both student preferences and teacher strategies must be considered when evaluating the role of the mother tongue in EFL education.

Building on this discussion, the present study explores why and when Kurdish is used in English lessons at Gasha Educational Community and how students and teachers understand its role in learning. It addresses the contextual gap described above by combining interviews with students in Grades 4–7, interviews with their English teachers, and classroom observations. The study does not claim that the benefits or risks of L1 use are new. Instead, it offers a small-scale, context-specific comparison of learners' perceived needs and teachers' strategies, focusing on comprehension, anxiety, cultural identity, and opportunities for English production. Specifically, it examines how students perceive the influence of mother-tongue use on their English learning. It also examines the classroom situations in which students prefer to use Kurdish and the reasons they give for this preference. Finally, it examines teachers' attitudes and practices regarding the use of Kurdish in English lessons.

Method

Research Design

This study used a qualitative narrative inquiry to examine students' and teachers' experiences of Kurdish use in English lessons. The design suited the study's purpose, which focused on participants' accounts of their experiences, classroom interactions, and the meanings they attached to their language choices rather than measuring a predetermined effect. Through narrative inquiry, the study drew on students' and teachers' stories about when, why, and how they used Kurdish in English classes. Two data sources informed the study. Semi-structured interviews provided access to participants' perspectives, and classroom observations allowed the study to consider those accounts alongside actual language practices in lessons.

Participants

The participants were 16 Kurdish students and three English teachers at Gasha Educational

Community. The students were in Grades 4 to 7 and aged 10 to 13. Including several grade levels allowed the study to capture a range of classroom experiences. The three teachers worked at the same institution, and each had several years of experience teaching EFL in Kurdistan.

Including both students and teachers allowed the issue to be examined from two related perspectives. Students could describe when Kurdish was useful or limiting for them, and teachers could explain how they managed language use during instruction. The participants came from a single institution and the sample was small. The findings are therefore intended to offer contextual insight rather than statistical generalization to all Kurdish EFL learners.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. We conducted the interviews with students and teachers separately. The student interviews invited learners to share their experiences of using Kurdish in English lessons. They covered when students relied on Kurdish, why, and how it affected their understanding and participation. The teacher interviews invited teachers to describe their views and classroom practices regarding L1 use. They covered the perceived benefits and risks of allowing Kurdish, the circumstances in which teachers used or permitted it, and the expectations they set for responses in English. The semi-structured format ensured that the same core topics were addressed with every participant, while participants could describe their experiences in their own words. The researchers recorded all interviews and then transcribed them for analysis.

Classroom observations were carried out as a complementary source of data. During the observed lessons, the researchers noted how Kurdish and English were used in classroom interactions. The purpose was to compare these notes with participants' interview accounts.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed thematically. The analysis began with repeated reading of the interview transcripts to become familiar with participants' accounts. Segments relevant to the use of Kurdish in English lessons were then coded. Codes with similar meanings were grouped into broader themes, which were then reviewed and refined against the data. The themes emerged inductively from recurring patterns in participants' responses rather than from a predetermined framework. The student and teacher data were first analyzed separately, then compared to identify where the two groups' accounts converged or differed. Finally, the interview findings were read alongside the classroom observation notes to compare participants' stated views with their observed practices. This triangulation of data sources was used to strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings.

The analysis produced five themes from the student interviews: Kurdish as a learning aid, overreliance on L1, confidence and classroom comfort, cultural identity, and teacher influence. The teacher interviews yielded three corresponding themes: Kurdish as a learning aid, the risk of overreliance, and the relationship between comfort, identity, and expectations for English output.

Findings and Discussion

Finding

Accounts from students and teachers at Gasha Educational Community show that Kurdish has no single, fixed role in the English classroom. Its value shifts with the learning situation, individual students' needs, and teachers' instructional decisions. Five interconnected themes emerged from the student interviews: the mother tongue as a learning aid, overreliance on it as a potential barrier, confidence and classroom comfort, cultural identity and belonging, and teacher influence and expectations. The teacher interviews echoed these themes from the other side of the classroom.

For many students, Kurdish was first and foremost a way to keep up with the lesson. When new vocabulary proved too difficult, younger learners such as P1 (Grade 4) turned to a desk partner for a quick explanation in Kurdish, which helped them avoid "fall[ing] behind." Others used the mother tongue as a stepping stone to new English expressions. P4 (Grade 5) described the process this way: "If I do not know how to say something in English, I say it in Kurdish first. Then the teacher tells me the English word. This way I learn step by step." Kurdish also helped with grammar. P9 (Grade 6) said that comparing English rules with Kurdish grammar "in my head" made them easier to understand, reflecting growing metalinguistic awareness. For the oldest participants, Kurdish was part of how they thought through a problem. P14 (Grade 7) captured this vividly: "When I am stuck, I think in Kurdish first. Then I try to translate into English. Without Kurdish, it is like building without tools."

The same students, however, knew this support came at a cost. Several admitted that Kurdish sometimes took the place of English practice. P2 (Grade 4) noticed that chatting with friends in Kurdish meant "using less English than I should." P8 (Grade 5) confessed to replying in Kurdish even when the teacher asked a question in English "because it is easier." Peer interaction made the habit harder to break. P13 (Grade 7) wanted to practice more English but found it difficult "when my friends switch." Perhaps the most candid reflection came from P16 (Grade 6): "I feel lazy when I can explain things in Kurdish. It stops me from challenging myself to find the English words." Taken together, these accounts show that the ease of Kurdish could reduce students' exposure to English, displace practice, and lead them to avoid linguistic effort.

Students' reliance on Kurdish was also closely tied to how they felt when speaking. Speaking English in front of the whole class made several learners shy or embarrassed, and Kurdish offered them a way to manage these feelings. P3 (Grade 4) explained, "Speaking English in front of the whole class makes me shy. But if I can use Kurdish first, I feel less nervous, and then I try English." P7 (Grade 5) likewise felt better after making a mistake when classmates understood the idea in Kurdish. The teacher's attitude strengthened this sense of safety. P11 (Grade 6) recalled the teacher saying, "Don't worry, you can use Kurdish if you want," which made the classroom "feel safe" and encouraged the student to try again in English. P15 (Grade 6) made a similar link between feeling relaxed and trying "harder to say things in English too." In each case, Kurdish did not end the interaction. It lowered the immediate pressure to speak, and the students then returned to English. This

suggests that such support is most useful when it leads to an attempt in English rather than replacing it.

Kurdish also carried a meaning beyond its practical use. For some students, it was part of who they were. While their English lessons introduced them to other nations and cultures, students such as P5 (Grade 4) wanted to share examples from Kurdish culture in their own language. P12 (Grade 7) found it interesting to compare other customs with Kurdish customs and said that using Kurdish evoked "a sense of pride in my identity." P6 (Grade 4) expressed this connection most personally:

> *The English language is foreign to me, yet the Kurdish language comes naturally to me. It is a reminder of who I am that I can speak Kurdish in the classroom. It is not something I want to give up.*

These accounts show that students did not see Kurdish as merely a translation tool. It also expressed cultural pride and belonging in the English classroom. This finding must be read within the specific school context, though, and it does not in itself demonstrate a broader effect on identity development.

Teacher expectations seemed to hold these competing functions together. Students consistently described a line between being allowed to use Kurdish for clarification and being expected to give their final answer in English. P10 (Grade 6) noted that the teacher sometimes explained very challenging material in Kurdish but "will always ask us to repeat in English." In a follow-up interview, P3 described the same rule from the student's side: "According to our instructor, it is OK to ask questions in Kurdish; however, the responses should be given in English. This prompts me to give additional consideration to my response." This distinction, with Kurdish for asking and English for answering, helps explain how L1 support and target-language practice could coexist in these classrooms.

The quotations above are illustrations, not a ranking of how often each experience occurred. They do not show how common these experiences are beyond the students interviewed. They do show the range of ways these learners made sense of Kurdish in their own lessons. In the students' accounts, Kurdish served two related but competing functions. It clarified, comforted, and connected them to their culture, but if used too quickly, it could also take away their chances to practice English.

The three teachers told a remarkably similar story. None of them saw Kurdish as wholly beneficial or wholly undesirable. Instead, they stressed regulating its use and bringing learners back to English. T1, who teaches Grades 4 to 6, described allowing brief use of Kurdish when a concept was particularly difficult: "I sometimes allow students to discuss in Kurdish for a minute when the concept is very difficult. It helps them grasp the meaning faster before we return to English." This strategic, time-limited use matches students' reports of peer explanation and comparison with Kurdish. The agreement between the two groups strengthens the interpretation that Kurdish can serve as temporary scaffolding in this setting.

The teachers shared the students' concern about overreliance. T2, who teaches Grades 5 to 7, observed, "The problem is that once students realize they can use Kurdish, they rely on it too much. Then English practice decreases, and their fluency develops more slowly." This mirrors the students' own admission that they sometimes

chose Kurdish simply because it was easier. Because both groups raised the same concern, the problem cannot be put down to student preference alone. Classroom routines and peer interaction may also shape which language becomes the default.

Finally, the teachers recognized Kurdish's emotional and cultural value without giving up their expectations for English. T3, who teaches Grades 4 to 7, summed up this balance: "Using Kurdish occasionally makes students feel safe and proud of their identity. But I always encourage them to give their final answers in English to balance comfort with progress." The teachers' accounts thus point to the same practical principle that emerged from the students' experiences. Kurdish is allowed when it serves a clear learning purpose, and then the class is deliberately brought back to English.

Discussion

The findings show that students and teachers at Gasha Educational Community generally described Kurdish as both a resource and a possible constraint in English lessons. Students' accounts focused on comprehension, confidence, and cultural belonging. Teachers' accounts focused on how to permit Kurdish strategically without reducing opportunities for English production. This dual view reflects a broader conclusion in the literature: the mother tongue is neither wholly beneficial nor wholly harmful in English learning, because it can act both as facilitative scaffolding and as a source of negative interference (Aeraj & Kesbi, 2025; Alngrat, 2026; Ulfah & Br. Perangin-Angin, 2026). The agreement between students and teachers is meaningful. Even so, the small sample and reliance on reported experiences mean the findings should be read as context-specific perceptions rather than evidence of a causal effect on English proficiency.

Many of these perceptions agree with earlier and more recent research. Students described Kurdish as a way into unfamiliar vocabulary and grammar through peer explanation, translation, and comparison with their first language. Teachers supported this view. T1, for example, allowed brief discussion in Kurdish when a concept was particularly difficult, "before we return to English." This pattern is consistent with work that treats L1 as a scaffold for comprehension (Cook, 2001; Macaro, 2009). It also aligns with recent accounts of controlled mother-tongue use as a cognitive scaffold that clarifies difficult target-language input without increasing learners' cognitive load (Alngrat, 2026; Norbu & Tenzin, 2026; Ulfah & Br. Perangin-Angin, 2026). Experimental studies in other contexts support the same view. In a quasi-experimental trial with 60 Moroccan high school students, instructor code-switching to Moroccan Arabic produced greater immediate vocabulary gains and better two-week retention than an English-only condition (Aeraj & Kesbi, 2025). Elementary pupils in the Philippines scored significantly higher when complex English concepts were explained in their native language (Bularon, 2025). In Pakistan, elementary students taught grammar with Pashto support outperformed an English-only control group (Waheed et al., 2024). Recent EFL studies also report that translanguaging can clarify content and instructions (Liando et al., 2023; Ramadhani & Maharsi, 2024), and learners in Sa'd and Qadermazi's (2015) study valued L1 for clarifying instructions and complex concepts. Students' comparisons of English and Kurdish grammar likewise reflect the

observation that comparing languages helps Kurdish EFL learners notice differences in form and meaning (Mekael & Muhammed, 2023). They also align with Källkvist et al. (2022), who found that a teacher's use of a shared language helped learners connect vocabulary and compare linguistic structures.

Both groups' concerns about overreliance also mirror previous research. Some students admitted answering in Kurdish because it was easier, even when they wanted to improve their English. T2 warned that once students know they can use Kurdish, "they rely on it too much." Earlier studies have described similar risks. Habitual translation or dependence on L1 can limit exposure to English and contribute to negative transfer (Khati, 2011; Zhao, 2019). Overuse of the mother tongue may also slow progress toward fluency and weaken learners' confidence in speaking spontaneously (Yusuf et al., 2021). More recent work shows that L1 advantages become liabilities when reliance on them is unprincipled. The most visible effect is on oral fluency. Learners who habitually translate before speaking experience less immersion, develop lower automaticity, and may fall silent when they must produce spontaneous speech (Li, 2024; Norbu & Tenzin, 2026; Xu, 2024). Researchers also warn that unchecked vernacular use can lead to communicative avoidance (Abudureyimu, 2025; Norbu & Tenzin, 2026; Raut, 2024; Ulfah & Br. Perangin-Angin, 2026). P16's admission that Kurdish "stops me from challenging myself to find the English words" reflects this concern. Studies reporting comprehension benefits alongside worries about dependence on L1 (Minerva & Gunawan, 2025) point in the same direction.

The affective and cultural dimensions of the findings also align with existing research. Students felt shy or embarrassed when speaking English, and they described Kurdish as a source of reassurance in moments of uncertainty. Teachers likewise reported that occasional Kurdish could make students feel safer, while they still expected English responses. This interpretation fits affective accounts of language learning (Krashen, 1982). It also fits recent findings that including L1 lowers anxiety, encourages peer collaboration, and builds communicative confidence (Jeanjaroonsri, 2022; N. Mohammed, 2025; Ulfah & Br. Perangin-Angin, 2026). It is further consistent with reported associations between translanguaging, confidence, and participation (Minerva & Gunawan, 2025). For some students, Kurdish also marked identity and served as a resource for comparing cultural practices. This is consistent with multilingual perspectives that treat learners' linguistic repertoires as resources rather than deficits (Cummins, 2000; García & Kleyn, 2016). Finally, students and teachers both described a classroom where Kurdish was available for clarification, while English remained the expected language for final responses. This closely resembles evidence from interaction corpora. There, brief L1 turns helped learners clarify task requirements and manage turn-taking, while the main communicative acts remained in English (Smaglii et al., 2025). This also aligns with classroom observations that other languages remain present for clarification even when English dominates (Beers Fägersten, 2012; Brevik & Rindal, 2020). This finding further echoes teachers' view in Yuvayapan's (2019) study that translanguaging can include lower-proficiency learners and encourage participation.

The present findings also differ from, or extend, previous research in several respects. First, much of the recent evidence comes from experimental or corpus-based designs that measured outcomes directly. Examples include vocabulary gains and retention (Aeraj & Kesbi, 2025), test scores (Bularon, 2025; Waheed et al., 2024), and the share of L1 exchanges across sixty observed lessons (Brevik & Rindal, 2020). One randomized intervention with 68 university writing students also showed that benefits may be uneven. Permitting code-switching did not change overall essay scores ($p = .46$). However, it clearly improved text explicitness and idea development (N. Mohammed, 2025). By contrast, the present study relied on participants' perceptions. It did not directly measure anxiety, assess identity development over time, or establish that L1 use improves language outcomes. Second, recent studies document negative transfer in specific linguistic domains: pronunciation, grammar and syntax, and reading and writing (Abudureyimu, 2025; Alngrat, 2026; Xu, 2024). Participants in the present study described the risk of overreliance mainly as lost practice and reduced effort rather than as particular linguistic errors. The contrast is clearest in mental translation. Li (2024) and Xu (2024) associate habitual mental translation with lower fluency. P14, however, described thinking in Kurdish first and then translating as a necessary tool, saying "without Kurdish, it is like building without tools."

Third, previous research shows that reliance on the mother tongue depends on learner proficiency, language distance, and instructional design (Alngrat, 2026). Reliance on the native language declines significantly as proficiency rises from B1 and below to B2 and above (Huang, 2025). Fourth-year university English majors restrict code-switching to complex conceptual problems. First-year undergraduates, by contrast, turn to L1 because of low confidence and limited vocabulary (Nguyen et al., 2026; Tran & Thanh, 2023). Those studies involved university learners. The present participants were school-age learners in Grades 4 to 7. Nevertheless, they gave similar reasons for using Kurdish, namely difficult vocabulary and shyness when speaking. Fourth, a comparison of 414 student teachers in India found no significant difference in English proficiency between Bengali and Kokborok speakers ($p > .05$), suggesting that instruction quality matters more than the first language ("Influence of Mother Tongue," 2025). The present findings point in a similar direction from a different angle. Participants did not describe Kurdish as inherently harmful. They described the problem as using it without clear limits or a planned return to English, and teachers' classroom rules seemed to shape whether Kurdish supported or displaced English. Fifth, students and teachers shared the concern about overreliance, so the challenge does not seem to rest on student preference alone. Classroom routines and peer interaction may also shape which language becomes the default, as P13's remark about friends who "switch" to Kurdish illustrates. Finally, the identity accounts take the discussion beyond comprehension and the cognitive and linguistic effects that most of the studies above examined. Participants' language choices were connected to how they understood themselves and to how they related English learning to familiar experiences.

Taken together, the findings support a context-sensitive approach to L1 use rather than

a blanket English-only or L1-dominant policy. This position is consistent with researchers' call for a principled balance between mother-tongue scaffolding and immersion in the target language (Abudureyimu, 2025; Norbu & Tenzin, 2026; Raut, 2024; Ulfah & Br. Perangin-Angin, 2026). Controlled use of the native language can strengthen initial concept understanding. However, lasting English acquisition still requires maximum exposure to the target language so learners develop autonomous language habits (Jeanjaroonsri, 2022; Li, 2024; Sampson, 2012). For teachers, Kurdish can be permitted briefly to clarify difficult instructions, vocabulary, or grammar, particularly when learners appear unable to proceed. Teachers should then prompt students to restate, discuss, or apply the idea in English, so that clarification does not replace target-language practice. The findings support viewing L1 as a temporary scaffold within multilingual classroom practice. The study contributes context rather than a new theory. It shows how the same language resource can be described as supporting comprehension, emotional comfort, and cultural belonging, and also as a risk when it reduces English practice. These pedagogical suggestions come from participants' accounts rather than tested interventions. Future classroom research, including experimental designs like those used in recent studies, is needed to evaluate their effects on language development among Kurdish school-age learners. Such research could also directly measure anxiety, identity, proficiency, and transfer outcomes, which this study could only examine through participants' perceptions.

Conclusion

This study explored students' experiences and teachers' perspectives on Kurdish use in English lessons at Gasha Educational Community. Participants described Kurdish as helpful for understanding difficult material, reducing the pressure of speaking English, and expressing cultural belonging. At the same time, both students and teachers recognized that relying too often on Kurdish could reduce opportunities to practice English. The central implication, therefore, is not to prohibit the mother tongue or allow it without limits, but to use it purposefully and return learners to English production. The study contributes a context-specific comparison of student and teacher accounts in one school setting; it does not establish causal effects on proficiency. Its limitations include the small sample, the focus on one institution, and the reliance on qualitative accounts. Future studies could examine classroom language practices across multiple schools over time and combine qualitative data with systematic observation or measures of English-language development.

Future research could follow learners over time to examine whether, and under what conditions, strategic L1 use is associated with changes in English participation and proficiency. Longitudinal classroom observation would help distinguish temporary support from patterns of dependence.

Comparative studies across public and private schools, grade levels, and Kurdish-speaking communities could clarify how institutional policies, teacher expectations, and learner proficiency shape language choices. Such studies should describe the context

carefully rather than assume that findings from one school apply to all Kurdish EFL settings.

Mixed-methods research could combine interviews and observations with carefully selected measures of English-language development. This would allow researchers to compare participants' perceptions with classroom practice and learning outcomes without treating the two as interchangeable.

Further work could also investigate teacher education and classroom policy, particularly how teachers decide when to permit Kurdish, how they transition back to English, and how learners respond to these expectations. Such studies could inform practical guidance on translanguaging and multilingual pedagogy.

Finally, future research could examine how students connect Kurdish cultural knowledge with English-language learning, while avoiding assumptions that language use alone demonstrates changes in identity or intercultural competence.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Generative AI Statement

The authors used Grammarly solely for language editing and proofreading to improve the clarity and readability of the manuscript. All AI-assisted output was critically reviewed and revised by the authors, who take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and final content of the manuscript.

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