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The Use of L1 at English Lessons: EFL in-Service Teachers' Perceptions

Rastislav Metruk
Corresponding author, Trnava University, Trnava, Slovakia & University of Ostrava, Ostrava, Czech Republic, *rastislav.metruk@truni.sk*

Patrícia Rafajdusová
Trnava University, Trnava, Slovakia, *patricia.rafajdusova@tvu.sk*

Using L1 at EFL (English as a foreign language) lessons has been the subject of ongoing debate for several decades. To contribute towards the existing body of knowledge, this qualitative study attempts to investigate Slovak EFL teachers' perceptions of using the mother tongue (L1) during EFL lessons. Drawing on semi-structured in-depth interviews with eleven in-service teachers, the research explores the extent, functions, and contextual factors influencing L1 use in the secondary and upper-secondary classrooms. Thematic analysis reveals that while teachers generally support the gradual elimination of L1 to promote English immersion, they also recognize its pedagogical value in explaining grammar, clarifying vocabulary, and enhancing classroom management. The findings suggest that L1 serves as a strategic tool that enhances comprehension, reduces learner anxiety, and supports instructional clarity, particularly among lower-level learners. Thus, the study adds to ongoing discussions about bilingual teaching practices and highlights the need for context-sensitive approaches to appropriate L1 integration in EFL settings. Theoretically, the study is framed by translanguaging (García & Wei, 2014) and teacher cognition (Borg, 2003); its contribution lies not in reconfirming earlier L1 studies but in foregrounding the tension between teachers' endorsement of English immersion and their continued, principled reliance on L1. Practically, the findings offer context-sensitive guidance for teacher education and language policy in monolingual EFL settings.

Keywords: L1 use, EFL education, teacher perceptions, Slovak education, language use in English

INTRODUCTION

In today's competitive and globalized world, students are required to enhance their English language skills (Alkhateeb, 2025; Al-Nabhani & Madiseh, 2025). The role of the first language (L1) in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) remains a topic of debate among educators and researchers. While some support solely using the target language (L2) to promote immersion and maximize exposure (Littlewood & Yu, 2011; Maghfiroh & Anwar, 2019), others favor a more balanced strategy that includes L1 as a

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teaching tool (Balabakgil & Mede, 2016; Hussein & Zeebaree, 2020). Using L1 has been linked to better understanding, lower student anxiety, and more effective classroom management, especially in settings where students have limited English exposure outside school (Cancino & Mera, 2022; Öz & Karaazmak, 2019).

In the Slovak education system, the strategic application of L1 has garnered increasing attention as a valuable method to assist learners in better understanding complex grammatical structures and unfamiliar vocabulary items, which are often challenging for students to grasp through immersion alone (Metruk & Rafajdusová, 2024). Nonetheless, the manner in which L1 is used, as well as its frequency and extent, varies widely across different classrooms and educators. These variations depend on numerous factors, including students' proficiency levels in the language, their age, the specific goals of each lesson, and the personal beliefs and teaching philosophies of the teachers themselves. While research on the role of L1 in EFL classrooms has increased, there is still a strong need for more localized and practical approaches and insights. Such insights should focus on understanding teachers' perceptions of L1 and how they integrate it into their daily teaching practices to improve language learning outcomes.

This study investigates Slovak EFL teachers' perspectives on using the L1 in the classroom. Through analysis of semi-structured interviews with eleven experienced educators, the research seeks to identify the functions, scope, and contextual factors influencing L1 use, as well as its perceived impact on language learning. The findings provide a comprehensive overview of bilingual teaching methods and contribute to the ongoing discussion on effective language instruction in EFL. The study is theoretically framed by translanguaging (García & Wei, 2014) and teacher cognition (Borg, 2003), and its practical significance lies in informing teacher education and classroom language policy in monolingual EFL contexts.

Literature Review

Teachers' perceptions of using the first language (L1) in EFL classes remain a contentious topic in language education (Ahsan, Younus, & Naeem, 2020; Kocaman & Aslan, 2018; Taşçı & Ataç, 2020; Yen & Danh, 2021). While some teachers see L1 as a helpful pedagogical tool that enhances understanding and classroom management, others advocate for a strict L2-only approach, emphasizing its potential advantages in immersion and language acquisition.

Several studies indicate that learner proficiency is a key factor shaping these perceptions. Cancino and Mera (2022) found that teachers in Chilean schools are willing to use L1, especially in lower-level classrooms where students struggle with L2 comprehension. Öz and Karaazmak (2019) echo this, reporting that as students' L2 skills improve, their need for L1 decreases – likely because increased confidence in the target language reduces reliance on it. Teachers should, therefore, consider students' proficiency when planning lessons involving L1. Hussein and Zeebaree (2020) add that balanced and careful use of L1 helps teach vocabulary and grammar, reinforcing its value as a learning aid. Meanwhile, Balabakgil and Mede (2016) found that English teachers in elementary monolingual classes generally view L1 positively as a tool that supports effective teaching and learning. However, a common pattern across these

studies is that they largely capture teacher attitudes rather than measuring actual learning outcomes – leaving open the question of whether perceived usefulness leads to measurable gains.

The picture becomes more nuanced when specific instructional effects are looked at. For instance, Outamgharte et al. (2024) show that L1 glosses can boost vocabulary learning more effectively for lower-level students than L2 glosses, providing solid evidence for L1's educational value. However, Mohebbi and Alavi (2014) warn that focusing only on L2 might be necessary to prevent students from relying too heavily on their first language, which could slow down their language development.

Teacher beliefs about L1 use do not develop in isolation – they are shaped by previous teaching experience and contextual factors. Balenović (2017) suggests that L1 can serve as a communication strategy when learners face difficulties, showing that individuals adjust their language use to meet situational needs and changing proficiency levels. In a similar vein, Galali and Cinkara (2017) found that EFL learners valued teachers who understood their L1, emphasizing the relational aspect of teaching effectiveness. These findings suggest that teachers' attitudes toward L1 can also stem from students' expressed preferences, which may differ across various educational settings and contexts. Learner-side factors are also implicated: Dunifa (2023) reports that EFL students' engagement is shaped by their motivational orientation and by practical constraints such as limited opportunities to use English – conditions that may lead teachers to draw on the L1 to sustain comprehension and motivation.

On the opposing side, some authors support the L2-only policy, arguing that a classroom using only the target language is the best way to promote L2 acquisition (Maghfiroh & Anwar, 2019). Hlas (2016) emphasizes that maximizing both the quality and quantity of target language exposure is essential, and Littlewood and Yu (2011) similarly assert that foreign language classrooms should provide as much exposure to the language as possible. These arguments hold theoretical weight, though they often assume ideal classroom conditions that might not match the realities of many EFL contexts. Countering the L2-only position, Alharbi (2015) recommends bilingual approaches in the Saudi EFL context and observes that teachers routinely draw on the mother tongue to clarify difficult concepts, vocabulary, and grammar. Framed this way, the resource-versus-obstacle debate rests on a largely monolingual ideology of language separation; translanguaging scholarship instead treats principled L1 use as a normal feature of bilingual pedagogy (Creese & Blackledge, 2010), shifting the question from whether to use L1 to under what conditions its use is principled.

This body of research ultimately shows that a significant middle ground exists where L1 is seen as a useful resource rather than an obstacle to L2 learning. Educational research increasingly emphasizes the importance of using L1 wisely and carefully, especially for understanding and academic support (Suantara, 2023; Burat & Çavuşoğlu, 2020; Wach & Hernández, 2019). Classroom-based research similarly documents that teachers' recourse to the L1 fulfils a range of pedagogical functions – including clarification, explanation, translation, checking comprehension, and developing vocabulary (Fachriyah, 2016). Yet this literature remains largely descriptive: it documents that

teachers endorse moderate L1 use but seldom interrogates the tension between such endorsement and teachers' simultaneous commitment to maximal target-language exposure, nor does it theorise L1 use within teacher cognition. The present study addresses this gap by examining how Slovak EFL teachers negotiate that tension and by interpreting their reported practices through translanguaging and teacher-cognition frameworks rather than through contextual replication alone.

In the context of Slovak language education, Metruk and Rafajdusová (2024) point out that Slovak EFL teachers generally prefer using L1 strategically as a helpful tool, especially for explaining complex grammar and new vocabulary. They also suggest using it in a controlled, limited way to prevent students from becoming too dependent on L1, keeping the focus on the target language.

Another study by Hanáková & Metruk (2017) investigated the extent to which L1 is used in English classrooms, when it is used, and teachers' reactions. It found that L1 is present in classes, which is notable because maximizing L2 use is often a primary goal in EFL instruction. Additionally, the findings indicate that teachers are inconsistent in setting rules for L1 use. Therefore, EFL teachers should focus more on this aspect of classroom management, especially at the beginning of the school year.

Theoretically, this study is framed by the notion of translanguaging (García & Wei, 2014), which reconceptualises bilingual speakers as drawing on a single, integrated linguistic repertoire rather than two separate language systems. From this perspective, L1 is not an obstacle to be eliminated but a legitimate resource for meaning-making and learning, which reframes the long-standing L1-versus-L2 debate by problematising the monolingual assumption underlying immersion-only approaches. Empirical work in EFL settings lends support to this view: Robillos (2023) found that embedding translanguaging in a pedagogical cycle improved learners' listening comprehension and that students regarded the use of their L1 as a normal, non-disruptive part of learning. This is complemented by teacher cognition research (Borg, 2003), which examines what teachers think, know, and believe and how these cognitions shape practice, noting that stated beliefs and classroom behaviour are not always aligned and that core beliefs may override professed principles (Phipps & Borg, 2009). Recent studies report precisely such a tension, with teachers endorsing English-only or immersion ideals while continuing to rely on L1 (Almayez, 2022; Putrawan & Sinaga, 2022; Zhou & Mann, 2021). Although prior work in the Slovak context has shown that teachers use L1 strategically (Hanáková & Metruk, 2017; Metruk & Rafajdusová, 2024), it has not interrogated this attitude–practice tension through an explicit theoretical lens. The present study addresses this conceptual gap, moving beyond contextual replication toward a more theoretically grounded account.

To summarize, the use of L1 in EFL classes remains a contentious issue among educators, with no clear consensus in sight. A substantial body of evidence shows that L1 can be a helpful tool for understanding and classroom management, especially for lower-level students who may not have enough L2 resources to follow instructions without it. At the same time, supporters of using only L2 argue that immersion is the

most effective way to acquire language and that L1, even if well-intentioned, can become a crutch.

The research reviewed here suggests that effective L1 use can meaningfully support vocabulary and grammar teaching, though teachers' attitudes toward it are far from uniform – they tend to be shaped by students' proficiency levels, classroom context, and institutional expectations. In the Slovak context specifically, teachers tend to endorse the strategic use of L1 for explaining complex ideas and abstract concepts, while cautioning against over-reliance that might limit students' exposure to the target language. This pragmatic stance aligns with the broader trend in the literature toward a balanced and thoughtful integration of L1 rather than complete acceptance or rejection. Overall, the evidence suggests a middle ground: L1, when used carefully and in response to genuine pedagogical needs, can improve language instruction without hindering acquisition goals.

METHOD

This research has been conducted to reach an authentic understanding of EFL teachers' opinions about using L1 during EFL classes. This research provides authentic responses from 11 in-service teachers who teach a variety of age groups among students at secondary and upper-secondary levels of public schools.

Research questions

To reach the stated research objectives, the following research questions were formed:

1. What is the general attitude of EFL teachers towards using L1 at Slovak EFL classes?
2. In what situations and to what extent do teachers consider the use of L1 appropriate?
3. What is the perception of translating words and sentences from L1 to L2 and vice versa in order to practice English?
4. What pedagogical functions do teachers attribute to L1 as a teaching tool during EFL classes?

Research methodology

The researchers followed the methodology of Nyanchoka et al. (2019), Eriksson, (2020), McKenzie (2007) for creating interviewing protocols for this paper. Along with questions, the protocols contained information such as the name of the interviewed teacher and their anonymized initial, date of the interview, duration of the interview, and contact information of the interviewed teacher. The research was carried out in the following stages: the researchers formulated the research questions and conducted a thorough literature review; the interview was then designed; the teachers were contacted and the interview questions distributed to them in advance; the interviews were conducted, transcribed, and analysed through thematic analysis; topics and codes were developed; the qualitative data were analysed; and the results were reported.

The teachers were contacted by the researchers who personally know these teachers from practice and from partner schools. Participants were recruited through purposive

(purposeful) sampling, and the criteria for inclusion were as follows: To be included, a teacher had to teach English as a foreign language, be a fully qualified EFL teacher, have at least ten years of teaching experience, be willing to participate and answer all the interview questions, and teach at the lower-secondary or upper-secondary level.

Ethical considerations were ensured by applying a variety of criteria during the creation of this interview. These measures included reviewing the data with the teachers themselves, sending the questions in advance so teachers could prepare, and conducting a thematic analysis of the answers; all participants gave their informed consent before taking part; a pilot interview was carried out with a few students of EFL pedagogy; the researchers remained impartial toward L1 use to limit personal bias; and the data analysis was conducted thoroughly and transparently.

Research procedures and instruments

This research investigated the opinions of 11 in-practice teachers of English as a foreign language at Slovak schools at secondary and upper secondary levels. Their names have been anonymized using initials that are similar to their actual names. These teachers have worked in their field for more than 10 years, with some of them teaching for approximately 20 years.

The following are the questions asked to all the teachers during a semi-structured interview, which was recorded using devices such as phones, tablets, or other recording tools. All these teachers agreed to be recorded during the interview. To ensure they provided honest and accurate answers, the questions were sent to them before and after the interview. Once the interview was finished and transcribed, the teachers had the chance to review their answers to prevent any misunderstandings or misconceptions. The following are the questions posed to the teachers:

Q.1: What generation of students do you enjoy teaching most? Young learners? Older children, graduate students of upper secondary level? Why?

Q.2: What is your L1?

Q.3: What do you think about using L1 during English lessons? Why?

Q.4: When do you use L1 the most? In which situations? With which students? Why?

Q.5: How much L1 do you think you use during your English lessons? Why?

Q.6: When do you think it is appropriate to use L1 during English lessons? Why?

Q.7: What is your opinion on gradually eliminating L1 during English lessons? Why?

Q.8: What is your opinion on the following statement: I use L1 (Slovak language) during my English lessons only when it facilitates learning. Why?

Q.9: Do you use translating sentences into L1 as a comprehension check? What do you think of that? Why do you use it?

Q.10: Do you use the translation of words/sentences as a way of teaching in your lessons? Why? Why do you use this way of teaching? How do you think it helps you?

Q.11: What do you think of using the English language right from the beginning of lessons?

Q.12: Do you think that using L1 helps students learn English?

These questions were developed in accordance with the findings of the literature review. The interviews lasted from 20 to 40 minutes and were conducted in person, by phone, or via video calls.

Codes and themes

To properly summarize and analyze the collected data, the steps suggested by Kushnir (2025) have been followed. First, the authors familiarized themselves with the data by transcribing the interviews. Next, they coded the data by developing initial codes that were then grouped into themes. These themes were checked against the responses of the interviewed teachers and named accordingly. Before presenting the final data, the codes and themes are introduced and examined. Coding proceeded inductively and iteratively: initial codes were generated from repeated readings of the transcripts, collated into candidate themes, and then refined and renamed through repeated comparison against the data set until the categories stabilised.

To strengthen the trustworthiness and reliability of the qualitative analysis, several measures were applied. Participant validation (member checking) was used, as the teachers reviewed their transcribed responses to confirm accuracy; the researchers maintained reflexivity by acknowledging their own positionality and remaining impartial toward L1 use; and the codes and themes were cross-checked between the researchers against the interview data to ensure interpretive consistency. Accordingly, the prevalence of themes reported below is intended to convey analytic patterns rather than statistical generalisation. As teacher educators familiar with the participants and the Slovak school context, the researchers occupied an insider position that aided rapport and interpretation while requiring deliberate bracketing of their own expectations about L1 use.

From the questions presented to the teachers, the following themes have been decided upon. These themes further elaborate into different coding categories in which the respondents answered about their: students' age preference; the functions of L1 use and their justifications; the extent of L1 use and its context; the gradual elimination of L1; translation as a teaching strategy; and English immersion from the beginning.

In each thematic category, additional codes have been established and numbered.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Students Age Preference

This theme has split into the codes of age groups, dividing into:

- Young learners, representing the students of the lower-secondary level,
- Teen learners, representing the students of upper-secondary level,
- Graduating students, who are typically aged 18 and are in the last grade of their high school, preparing for their final exams

– All-ages group, claiming that the student groups each have their specific characteristics, which the teachers appreciate.

These groups have been analyzed and coded for their unique features, such as spontaneity in young learners, more in-depth discussions and engagement with teens, or targeted exam preparation for graduate students.

"They are spontaneous, playful, and absorb information like a sponge." (A)

"I love discussions with them on various topics." (C)

"I enjoy teaching all generations… it makes my job various." (P)

Table 1
Age preference of interviewed teachers

Age preference of EFL students	Out of 11
Young learners	5
Teens	3
Graduates	1
All ages appreciated	2

Table 1 shows the teachers' responses, grouped by their preferred age groups to teach.

Functions of L1 Use and Their Justifications

The next theme that has been analyzed and coded is the description of functions of L1 that the teachers described in their interviews. The main groups to which the answers were divided into:

– grammar explanation,
– vocabulary clarification,
– instructional support,
– comprehension aid,

L1 use according to the motivation and comfort of the students.

Within grammar explanations, L1 is primarily used to clearly and accurately describe grammar rules. When L1 is used for vocabulary clarification, it may help clarify isolated words or phrases for better student understanding. Instructional use of L1 aims to clarify tasks during lessons, mainly to save time. The last category is motivation and comfort, where L1 is mainly used to reduce anxiety among students who lack confidence in their EFL skills or to maintain a supportive atmosphere to enhance learning.

"I use L1 mostly during grammar explanation." (J)

"Children were scared… they didn't understand me." (P)

These accounts suggest that L1 operates not only as a cognitive aid for conveying meaning but also as an affective resource: by reducing anxiety and signalling support, teachers use L1 to protect learners' confidence, which they treat as a precondition for engagement.

Table 2
Functions of L1 use and their justifications

Functions of L1	Out of 11
Grammar Explanation	8
Vocabulary Clarification	1
Instructional Support	3
Comprehension Aid	3
Motivation & Comfort	6

Since the interviews were semi-structured, the teachers were asked a question, and the interviewer allowed them to speak as much as they needed. As a result, the teachers discussed multiple topics during their responses. Many teachers support different views simultaneously; for example, Teacher X mainly talked about grammar explanation in L1 but also mentioned that students need to feel comfortable in their lessons to perform their best. Teacher U, for instance, noted that understanding different definitions in English is more important than translation, but some students also require L1 to fully understand new vocabulary and support their learning understanding.

> *"I use L1 to make sure they understand new vocabulary" (U)*

Overall, the teachers mention various cases in which they use L1. Among the most common responses listed in Table 2, they also provide reasons for their use. Some say that using L1 is important for students with specific needs or to improve the workflow. Others mention that their students do not encounter English outside the classroom, so they sometimes do not understand all instructions properly.

> *"I think it's necessary to use it with my students because for the majority of them it's their first time encountering the English language." (D)*

This statement was repeated many times during the interviews, mentioning that students differ in their personalities and understanding. Teachers also mention factors affecting their use of L1, such as late lessons of the day, where some students may not pay as much attention as required. Therefore, body language should be incorporated into giving English instructions to help students understand better. These actions can be tiring; thus, perceiving students' needs and moderating energy levels are necessary.

> *"I believe it would be very discouraging to use only English at all times, so I prefer to explain things in English, ask questions so that students try to explain things in their own words and finally, if it is too difficult, they are allowed to explain it in Slovak." (Z)*

The main reason most teachers mention regarding their overall use of L1 mainly focuses on explaining grammar and boosting motivation during EFL classes. Read across cases, these accounts converge on cognitive-instrumental functions (grammar, vocabulary, instructions) while a recurrent minority foreground comfort and motivation, indicating that L1 also performs a socio-emotional role and not merely an explanatory one.

Extent of L1 use and its context

To determine how much L1 is used by teachers, codes have been created to categorize their answers. Most teachers responded that their decision to use L1, to any extent, depends on the age and/or level of their students. It also depends on the type of lesson being taught. If the lesson focuses on grammar explanation, the use of L1 is higher than in lessons that focus on communication development.

Table 3
Extent of L1 use and its context

Extent of L1 use and its context	Out of 11
High L1 Use	3
Moderate L1 Use	1
Minimal L1 Use	4
Age/Level Dependent	6

Some teachers used percentage as the indicator of their L1 use and it ranged from thirty to seventy percent. Given the small qualitative sample, such percentages and frequency counts are treated as indicative tendencies rather than statistically generalisable distributions. Therefore, the codes have been decided upon as:

- high L1 use,
- moderate L1 use,
- minimal L1 use

Age and/or level-dependent group, in which the teachers gave inconclusive answers to which group they incline to.

During their interviews, they mentioned age, language skills level, motivation, and other factors affecting their teaching experience and process. The clearest systematic pattern is that reported L1 use scales inversely with learner age and proficiency, decreasing with older and more advanced groups; because the sampling criterion fixed teaching experience at ten years or more, variation by teacher experience could not be examined, so the patterning observed here is primarily learner- rather than teacher-driven.

> *"According to the age of students, I would like to use English more. Young learners want to speak all lesson; teenagers aren't that confident." (X)*

> *"With younger students L1 takes up majority… with older ones I use it rarely."* (U)

Many teachers also mentioned the reasons for their preferred age group, such as C, saying: *"I prefer teaching teenagers and young adults. They enrich me, broaden my horizons, I learn a lot of new things from them, I love discussions with them on various topics, it is very inspiring, and it keeps me young and updated"*

Gradual elimination of L1

The next coding category focuses on the gradual elimination of L1, which revealed different approaches and arguments about removing L1. Ten out of eleven teachers mentioned that eliminating L1 is the goal of EFL lessons, yet it also serves as an

important tool in various types of lessons. If L1 is eliminated, English language lessons may suffer in quality and time management. Therefore, additional coding categories that may modify views on the elimination of English language use are:

- conditional use,
- strategic use;

meaning that L1 should be used in various conditions, e.g., readiness of the students, or the types of lessons.

"I want to emphasize that it depends on the language skills of students." (G)

Strategic use of L1 depicts the use of L1 for specific actions or activities when it is necessary.

"I don't use It [L1]; only when it facilitates learning." (M)

Table 4
Gradual elimination of L1

Gradual elimination of L1	Out of 11
Supports elimination	10
Conditional elimination	5
Strategic use	2

Almost all the teachers supported eliminating L1 during students' learning journey. However, they also mentioned various reasons why this process might slow down or not be completed. These factors can be seen as conditions affecting learning, such as different student levels, motivation depending on the time of day, class climate, and others. The one teacher who disagreed with fully eliminating English was a lower-secondary teacher who explained:

"It could be possible with highly motivated students. I don't think L1 should be eliminated, some children might get frustrated, feel less secure or comfortable…" (X)

This ambivalence – pursuing the elimination of L1 as an ideal while resisting full immersion in practice – illustrates the tension between teachers' professed monolingual goals and their classroom decisions, a pattern more productively read as principled translanguaging than as inconsistency.

Next, the teachers were asked whether they use any form of translation in their lessons, mainly focusing on translating isolated words, phrases, or entire sentences. Most teachers avoid translation as a teaching method but occasionally use it to check if students understand their tasks or to help categorize words. One teacher uses translation to reinforce grammar learning and understanding, particularly for comprehension.

"I use it to help my students learn and understand these words." (D)

Many of the teachers avoid translation as a teaching method. They claim that translation may be very misleading and confusing to teach. The teachers prefer that the students

understand the words and its use in different variations and phrases rather than focusing on the definite meaning of the same word in L1.

> *"I don't use translation into L1. I think translation is a very difficult skill." (X)*

> *"I never use that. I don't feel comfortable with this kind of exercise because things can be expressed in many different ways in English and it would be wrong to say that only one of them is correct because that's what we are learning at the moment." (Z)*

> *"I hate translation. It is just mechanical learning, and vocabulary can be taught in so many other ways. Vocabulary has a million of uses and many different meanings..." (M)*

Some teachers do not deny using translation but provide reasons for their choice. In their opinion, it is impossible to teach only in English, so a mix of language use and translation is always incorporated in EFL lessons. After all, EFL stands for English as a foreign language.

> *"I do, but not often. My goal is to check their understanding of the new vocabulary and their overall understanding of the texts." (J)*

> *"Only until the learner reaches pre-intermediate level. It is important to check whether the learner understands the basic units such as words. It is impossible to train understanding without knowing what the words mean." (A)*

Table 5
Translation as a teaching strategy

Translation as a teaching strategy	Out of 11
Translation for Comprehension	1
Avoids Translation	5
Mixed Strategy	5

Opinions on using translation methods in lessons remain a highly discussed topic, with many in-service teachers reaching different conclusions. However, from the interviews, grammar-translation methods are considered old-fashioned and not helpful anymore. The split is itself analytically telling: a subset rejected translation on principle ("I hate translation"), a stance closer to monolingual orthodoxy, whereas others retained it pragmatically as a comprehension check for lower-level learners. This divergence exemplifies the gap between stated belief and reported practice that teacher-cognition research treats as characteristic (Borg, 2003; Phipps & Borg, 2009).

English immersion from the beginning

As has already been mentioned, all the teachers support gradually eliminating L1 in their lessons. However, when asked about immersing students in English from the very beginning, their opinions shifted and varied. Some teachers advocate for full immersion from the start, arguing that students will adapt to English better. Many teachers believe that English immersion depends on the students themselves – their motivation, level, skills, and so on. Some teachers specifically stated that, among young learners, instructors should start with a mixed approach to avoid frustration or demotivation.

> *"I cannot imagine using only English with utter beginners. I think it would make it really difficult, frustrating, and discouraging for the students."* (U)

> *"I tried it when I started to teach. I came to a primary school, spoke only in English for the first minutes. Children were scared. They didn't understand me, so I asked myself "Would you feel comfortable?" (*P)

Table 6
English immersion from the beginning

English immersion from the beginning	Out of 11
Full Immersion Support	3
Conditional Immersion	5
Mixed Language Start	2
Immersion Challenges	2

Some of the interviewed teachers also stated the challenges that come with attempting full English immersion with students.

> *"[…] if the teacher is well prepared in methodology, respects the age of group. It may develop student's confidence to use English."* (M)

> *"I don't think it would be possible with the level of English my students have at the beginning. I think it would be very difficult and probably scary and frustrating for them."* (D)

This topic got connected to gradual elimination of L1 fairly often during the interviews. Many teachers recalled the emotional perception that is necessary for teachers during lessons.

> *"I learned Slovak grammar to get closer to my students, to help them understand what they are learning with me. It is very hard to teach English as a foreign language without the students' mother tongue." (M)*

L1 as a supportive tool

The final issue discussed is whether L1 should be used as a supportive tool during EFL lessons. Most teachers were supportive of not completely eliminating L1 in these lessons, with some fully supporting the use of L1. One teacher mentioned that the goal of EFL lessons is to achieve full English communication, so L1 should not be included during lessons. The reasons teachers cited for a mixed approach to using L1 are mostly bureaucratic, such as classroom management with behavioral issues and sharing important information outside of lesson topics etc.

Table 7
L1 as a supportive tool

L1 as a supportive tool	Out of 11
Full support	4
L1 avoidance	1
Mixed strategy	6

"Yes, I do [think that L1 helps]. However, the use of L1 should be appropriate for their level and age" (U)

Most teachers see L1 as a helpful tool in EFL classes for explanations, moderation, motivation, and communication. One teacher notes that L1 should not be used during lessons because students may become dependent on it when learning gets challenging. "I think that depends on the age of students and their language skills. It should be eliminated gradually." (J) However, most teachers support gradually reducing L1 based on students' level and knowledge. They also mention that L1 should be used strategically and only when necessary, avoiding its use for direct translation instruction. Set against the lone dissenting voice, this near-unanimous endorsement suggests that the perceived value of L1 operates as a core, experientially anchored belief, whereas the commitment to its eventual elimination functions as a more peripheral, ideologically held aspiration.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper explored the perceptions and practical opinions of Slovak EFL teachers regarding the use of L1 in English lessons. Drawing on qualitative data collected from eleven semi-structured interviews, a thematic analysis identified several patterns that reveal how teachers conceptualize and apply L1 in their classroom practices. The findings show that Slovak teachers generally adopt a pragmatic stance toward L1 use: they see it as pedagogically useful while simultaneously endorsing the long-term goal of increased English immersion. This duality illustrates a balanced approach rather than adherence to a strict monolingual or bilingual ideology.

Interpreted through a translanguaging lens (García & Wei, 2014), this duality appears less contradictory than it first seems: teachers' flexible recourse to L1 reflects a mobilisation of learners' full linguistic repertoire rather than a failure to achieve immersion. At the same time, the gap between teachers' endorsement of English-only ideals and their actual reliance on L1 exemplifies the well-documented tension between stated beliefs and classroom practice in teacher cognition research (Borg, 2003; Phipps & Borg, 2009), and mirrors recent translanguaging studies that report the same attitude–practice discrepancy (Almayez, 2022; Putrawan & Sinaga, 2022). Read this way, the pattern is not mere inconsistency: teachers' core beliefs – prioritising comprehension, motivation, and learner well-being – appear to override the more peripheral, ideologically endorsed principle of monolingual immersion.

Teachers consistently emphasized that L1 supports comprehension, reduces learner anxiety, and enhances instructional clarity where functions are well documented in existing research (Hussein & Zeebaree, 2020; Balabakgil & Mede, 2016; Outamgharte et al., 2024; Metruk & Rafajdusová, 2024). However, the present study adds nuance by showing that Slovak teachers justify L1 use not only through cognitive benefits but also through emotional and motivational factors. Several respondents described L1 as a tool that contributes to a psychologically safe classroom environment, suggesting that affective considerations play a more significant role in Slovak EFL teaching than previously reported.

Across interviews, teachers identified grammar explanations, vocabulary clarification, and task instructions as the primary functions of L1. These uses are largely motivated by a desire for efficiency and accuracy, especially when abstract concepts or complex instructions are involved. The emotional dimension, particularly the need to prevent frustration among less confident learners, further reinforces the perceived necessity of L1. This interdependence between cognitive and emotional rationales demonstrates that teachers do not view L1 as a single-purpose tool but as part of a wider repertoire of strategies to meet diverse learner needs. Interpreted through a translanguaging lens, this repertoire is not a concession to learner deficit but a principled mobilisation of learners' full linguistic resources (García & Wei, 2014; Creese & Blackledge, 2010).

The extent of L1 use varied depending on student age, proficiency level, and lesson type. Teachers reported greater reliance on L1 with younger and lower-proficiency learners, particularly during grammar-focused lessons, while more advanced groups were taught with minimal L1. These patterns correspond with findings from Öz and Karaazmak (2019), Cancino and Mera (2022), and Balenović (2017), who observe that L1 use tends to decrease as learner proficiency increases. The present study extends this literature by highlighting that Slovak teachers make these adjustments dynamically, responding not only to linguistic proficiency but also to fluctuating levels of motivation, class cohesion, and even time of day – factors less commonly addressed in previous research. Within teacher cognition, these dynamic adjustments indicate that teachers' beliefs about L1 are not fixed rules but context-sensitive judgements continually recalibrated against learner readiness.

Teachers expressed mixed views on translation as a teaching strategy. Some used translation for comprehension checks or vocabulary reinforcement, while others rejected it, arguing that it encourages oversimplification and reliance on direct equivalence between languages. These concerns reflect broader debates about the limitations of translation-based pedagogy. Nevertheless, a few participants acknowledged that translation can be valuable in early stages of learning, especially when verifying understanding or introducing basic vocabulary. As Štubňa (2019) notes, translation may be appropriate when the target language closely parallels the source language in content and form. The variation observed in this study indicates that Slovak teachers navigate translation pragmatically, selecting or rejecting it based on learner readiness and lesson objectives rather than ideological preferences. At the same time, the principled refusal of translation by some teachers shows that ideological commitments do surface, producing the belief–practice tensions that teacher-cognition research treats as the norm rather than the exception (Phipps & Borg, 2009).

Opinions regarding English-only immersion at the start of learning were similarly divided. Teachers who supported immediate immersion believed it could accelerate acquisition and build confidence, echoing arguments by Maghfiroh & Anwar (2019) and Littlewood & Yu (2011). In contrast, others warned that full immersion can overwhelm beginners and lead to discouragement, a perspective aligned with Mohebbi & Alavi's (2014) caution against excessive reliance on L2-only policies. Importantly, respondents often framed immersion not as a universal principle but as a context-dependent strategy requiring careful calibration to learners' needs. This

suggests that Slovak EFL teachers prioritize pedagogical responsiveness over methodological purity.

Finally, the perception of L1 as a supportive tool was widely endorsed. Teachers highlighted its role in classroom management, addressing behavioural issues, and communicating essential information unrelated to instructional content. This pragmatic use of L1 resonates with findings from Suantara (2023) and Burat & Çavuşoğlu (2020), who likewise report that teachers value L1 for maintaining order, clarity, and rapport. Although one participant advocated for complete avoidance of L1, the prevailing view favored a strategically selective approach in which L1 is used when necessary but gradually reduced as learners progress.

Importantly, the study reveals that the Slovak educational context shapes L1 practices in distinctive ways. Teachers described working conditions that require continual adaptation: heterogeneous classes, inconsistent proficiency levels, limited exposure to English outside school, and frequent classroom reorganization. Several respondents noted that each academic year feels like "starting from the beginning," even with returning students, due to these contextual challenges. Such conditions necessitate pedagogical flexibility, and L1 becomes one of the few stable tools teachers can rely on to maintain continuity and support learning. This finding underscores that debates about L1 use cannot be separated from the realities of the school environment; methodological preferences are deeply intertwined with contextual constraints. Theorised rather than merely described, the Slovak case shows how systemic constraints shape which beliefs become core and which remain aspirational: the curricular ideal of maximal English exposure is reframed at classroom level as principled, strategic L1 use, exposing a tension between monolingual policy ideals and multilingual classroom realities.

This study is subject to several limitations. It relies on the self-reported perceptions of a small, purposively selected sample of eleven teachers within a single national context, which limits the transferability of the findings; moreover, the absence of classroom observation means that the relationship between teachers' stated beliefs and their actual practices could not be directly verified. Future research could triangulate interviews with classroom observation and learner perspectives, and could extend the translanguaging framework to increasingly multilingual Slovak classrooms.

Theoretically, the study extends translanguaging and teacher cognition scholarship by showing how core beliefs about comprehension and affect mediate teachers' ideological commitment to immersion. In terms of policy and practice, it suggests that teacher-education programmes and curricular guidelines in monolingual EFL settings should explicitly legitimise principled, strategic L1 use as a pedagogical resource rather than treating it as a deficit to be eliminated. More concretely, the data indicate conditions under which L1 is pedagogically justified in this setting – clarifying abstract grammar, pre-empting comprehension breakdown, supporting beginners and lower-proficiency learners, and reducing anxiety – while cautioning against its use for routine vocabulary translation. For research, the findings invite classroom-observation and longitudinal designs that test whether these self-reported beliefs translate into practice, extending teacher-cognition and translanguaging work in monolingual EFL settings.

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