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Students' Perspectives on the Use of L1 In English Language (as an L2) Classrooms: A Case Study of the Department of English, Isa Kaita College of Education, Dutsinma, Katsina State, Nigeria.

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the reasons for, and perspectives of, students regarding the use of their first language (L1) in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms at Isa Kaita College of Education, Dutsin-ma, Katsina State, Nigeria. It is grounded in the ongoing scholarly debate about the role of learners' mother tongue in second language acquisition (Cook, 2001; Cummins, 2007; Turnbull & Dailey-O'Cain, 2009). Using a convergent mixed-methods design, data were collected through an online survey (N = 51) and semi-structured follow-up interviews (n = 12). Survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics, and interview data were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke (2021). Results showed that students used their first language, Hausa, for a variety of purposes grammar clarification, understanding instructions, vocabulary negotiation, anxiety reduction and peer collaboration with the frequency of use declining descriptively by English proficiency level and year of study. Interview findings elaborated these patterns, revealing that students experience Hausa as a comprehension bridge, an anxiety buffer and a peer-learning tool, while becoming more selective in its use as they advance. Attitudes toward limited L1 use were broadly positive and nuanced. These findings align with previous research indicating that L1 use serves cognitive, metalinguistic and affective functions in language learning (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003; Swain & Lapkin, 2000). The findings can help teachers and students understand students' reasons for L1 use, informing classroom management practices designed to support the effective development of English language proficiency.

KEYWORDS: L1 use; ESL classrooms; student perspectives; Hausa language; Nigeria; second language acquisition; translanguaging; code-switching; language identity; higher education.

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1. Introduction

For many people, holding on to a mother tongue is inseparable from holding on to cultural identity. As a teacher and student of English, the principal researcher has repeatedly observed students and colleagues

switching to Hausa even within English-medium classrooms, often explaining that “this is my mother tongue; I am not a native English speaker.” This pattern reflects the deep connection between language and identity that scholars have long identified (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004; Norton, 2013; Kramsch, 2009), and it raises the central question this study investigates: why do English language students continue to use their first language (L1) while learning English as a second language (L2)?

The role of L1 in L2 instruction has shifted considerably across the history of language teaching methodology (Howatt & Widdowson, 2004). The nineteenth-century Grammar-Translation Method relied heavily on L1 (Richards & Rodgers, 2014), while the Reform Movement's Direct Method banned it outright, assuming that L2 acquisition should mirror L1 acquisition (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). Mid-century Audiolingualism, grounded in behaviourist psychology and contrastive analysis, treated L1 as a source of interference to be eliminated (Lado, 1957; Fries, 1945).

More recent scholarship has challenged these assumptions. Auerbach (1993) argued that English-Only policies reflect sociopolitical ideology about language and power rather than pedagogical necessity, and can disempower learners from marginalised communities, while strategic use of L1 could facilitate rather than hinder L2 acquisition. Cummins (1979, 2000) proposed the Interdependence Hypothesis, whereby L1 and L2 proficiency are interdependent, so that strong L1 literacy and Common Underlying Proficiency can support rather than hinder L2 acquisition. García and Wei (2014) went further, reframing bilingual competence through translanguaging, which treats a learner's languages as one integrated repertoire rather than separate systems to be kept apart in instruction (Canagarajah, 2011). Norton (2013) and Kramsch (2009) add that language is never a neutral medium but carries cultural meanings and identity markers, helping to explain why students may resist abandoning their first language even in English-medium settings. This paper explores English language students' opinions and habits regarding their use of L1 in a setting where English is meant to be the medium of instruction.

2. Problem Statement

Considerable research exists internationally on L1 use in English classrooms (Atkinson, 1987; Cook, 2001; Turnbull & Dailey-O'Cain, 2009), but most of it has examined teachers' opinions or the frequency of L1 use (Macaro, 2001; Levine, 2003) rather than students' own perspectives and reasons.

Theoretically, Cook (2001) discussed the different ways in which L1 can be positively used in foreign language classrooms, weighing the arguments that L2 teachers and linguists have made on the topic. He argued that because L1 and L2 constitute two different linguistic systems, learners should reduce their use of L1 in order to fully acquire the L2. Yet, although teachers keep telling students to separate the two languages, learners keep comparing the two linguistic systems as they learn the L2 (Selinker, 1972); for that reason, teachers usually encourage students to avoid using or comparing the languages, since students need as much exposure as possible to the target language in order to acquire it (Krashen, 1985).

Contextually, several researchers have documented a persistent gap in student-focused research. Storch and Wigglesworth (2003) found that while teachers often assume L1 use indicates avoidance or laziness, students themselves report using L1 for purposes including task management, vocabulary negotiation and maintaining engagement with challenging content, and Brooks and Donato (1994) similarly demonstrated that L1 use in collaborative tasks can serve important cognitive and social functions. Little of this student-focused research, however, has been conducted in Nigerian ESL settings. The present study addresses that gap by focusing specifically on students' perspectives in the Nigerian ESL context, examining why English language students at Isa Kaita College of Education use Hausa, their mother tongue, in English classrooms, with a view to informing pedagogical practice and the broader understanding of L1 use in second language acquisition.

3. Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of this study is to gain deeper insight into why English language students use their mother tongue in English classrooms instead of English. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. Investigate the reasons English language students use L1 in English classrooms at Isa Kaita College of Education;

2. Examine students' perspectives and attitudes on their own use of L1 in English classrooms;
3. Explore students' reasons for not using English exclusively; and
4. Identify patterns in L1 use based on students' language background, age and English proficiency level.

Pedagogically, the findings are intended to build students' self-awareness of their own language choices (Flavell, 1979), inform teachers' understanding of why students default to L1, and guide instructional design so that classroom materials and methods better support effective English-only interaction.

4. Literature Review

The use of the first language in the English classroom remains an issue that generates diverse opinion among researchers, teachers and students, some opposed to it and others supportive, each with their own justifications.

4.1 Foundational and Teacher-Focused Studies

Mid-century behaviourist accounts treated L1 as interference: Lado's (1957) Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis held that differences between L1 and L2 would cause difficulty and errors, implying that L1 use should be avoided. Dulay and Burt (1974) challenged this view with their Creative Construction Hypothesis, arguing that L2 acquisition follows developmental sequences similar to L1 acquisition and is not primarily shaped by L1 transfer. Cummins' (1979, 2000) work on bilingual proficiency was particularly influential in reframing the role of L1: his Developmental Interdependence Hypothesis proposed that cognitive and academic language proficiency transfers across languages, so that development in L1 can support rather than hinder L2 acquisition.

Studies of teachers' beliefs and practices reach a broadly consistent conclusion. Macaro (2001), investigating UK secondary school foreign language teachers, identified three positions: those who insisted on exclusive L2 use, those who allowed occasional L1 use, and those who strategically employed L1 for specific purposes. Levine (2003), surveying university-level foreign language instructors in the United States, found that despite institutional expectations for target-language use, most teachers reported using L1 for functions such as explaining grammar, giving instructions and building rapport. In the Saudi EFL context, Alshammari (2011) similarly found that most teachers acknowledged using L1 for classroom management, explaining difficult concepts and building relationships with students. Comparable patterns have been reported in the Omani context: Al-Buraiki (2008) found that teachers of young learners viewed L1 as a practical classroom-management resource despite official English-only expectations, and Al-Hadhrami (2008) reported similar views among Grade 5 EFL teachers, who drew on students' first language to support behaviour management and comprehension checks.

4.2 Students' Attitudes towards L1 Use

A larger body of work has examined students directly. Schweers (1999) studied 178 university-level EFL students in Spain and found that 88 percent believed L1 use was necessary for explaining grammar, while 69 percent wanted L1 used for vocabulary instruction. Rolin-Ianziti and Varshney (2008) examined 23 university-level learners of French in Australia and found that judicious teacher use of L1 helped students understand difficult concepts, reduced anxiety, and made the learning environment more comfortable. Storch and Wigglesworth (2003), studying 24 ESL university students in Australia, similarly found that L1 use for task management and vocabulary negotiation was strategic rather than random.

Comparable findings recur across other contexts. Liu et al. (2004) examined 100 university EFL students in South Korea and 100 in Japan and found that students in both contexts used L1 primarily for affective purposes, such as reducing anxiety, and cognitive purposes, such as understanding complex concepts. Alshammari (2011) studied 80 university EFL students in Saudi Arabia and found that students used L1 for asking questions, clarifying instructions and discussing grammar, while Nazary (2008), investigating 110 university EFL students in Iran, found positive attitudes toward judicious L1 use, particularly for explaining grammar, teaching vocabulary and reducing anxiety. Similarly, Afzal (2012) found that providing Iranian EFL learners with first-language equivalents of English vocabulary items measurably supported their active vocabulary development, reinforcing the vocabulary-negotiation function of L1 identified across these studies.

4.3 Synthesis and Gap

Across this literature, four patterns stand out: research has focused disproportionately on teachers rather than students; most studies come from EFL contexts in Asia, the Middle East and Europe, with limited African ESL research; L1 use serves cognitive, metacognitive and affective functions; and proficiency level consistently predicts both the amount and purpose of L1 use. The present study addresses the resulting gap by investigating student perspectives in a Nigerian ESL context.

5. Methodology

5.1 Research Design

This study used a convergent mixed-methods design, combining a quantitative survey with qualitative follow-up interviews to provide a comprehensive account of students' perspectives on L1 use (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Dörnyei, 2007). In this design, quantitative and qualitative data were collected in parallel, analysed separately, and then integrated at the interpretation stage to allow the strengths of each approach to complement the other.

5.2 Participants

Fifty-one students from the Department of English Language, Isa Kaita College of Education, Dutsin-ma, were selected through purposive sampling (Patton, 2015). All were native Hausa speakers learning English as a second language. Table 1 summarises their demographic characteristics.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	29	56.9
	Female	22	43.1
Age Group	18–22 years	18	35.3
	23–27 years	21	41.2
	28–32 years	8	15.7
	33 years and above	4	7.8
Year of Study (NCE Level)	NCE I	18	35.3
	NCE II	19	37.3
	NCE III	14	27.5
Self-rated English Proficiency	Advanced	6	11.8
	Upper Intermediate	14	27.5
	Intermediate	19	37.3
	Elementary	12	23.5

Note. Percentages are rounded to one decimal place and may not sum to exactly 100%. Categories are mutually exclusive; each participant is represented once in each demographic variable. Self-rated English proficiency was based on a single self-assessment item using the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) descriptors (A1–C1).

5.3 Instruments and Procedure

Data collection proceeded in two phases.

Phase One: Survey.

An online survey containing two parts was administered. The first part addressed ten reasons students had for using L1 in English classrooms, with participants rating how often each reason applied to them (always, usually, sometimes, or never). The second part contained ten attitude statements about L1 use, to which participants indicated their degree of agreement or disagreement on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree). Mean scores above 3.0

indicate general agreement; scores below 3.0 indicate general disagreement. The survey items were developed from two sources: the literature review, which surfaced the most common reasons, opinions and attitudes reported in prior studies, and informal face-to-face and online polling of students, classmates and colleagues about their own reasons for using L1 (Andrews et al., 2003). The “teacher who speaks L1” item was included because classroom management research (Macaro, 2001; Levine, 2003) show that students' own L1 use are shaped by their teachers' language choices and by the implicit permission structure of the classroom. This item is treated as a contextual/attitudinal item rather than a direct measure of student L1 use.

Pilot Study.

The survey was piloted with 15 students from the same department who were not part of the main sample. The pilot assessed item clarity, completion time and internal consistency. Cronbach's alpha for the ten attitude items was .81; the ten reason items were analysed descriptively because they measure frequency of distinct behaviours rather than a single latent construct. Following the pilot, two items were recorded for clarity.

Phase Two: Interviews.

Semi-structured follow-up interviews were conducted with twelve participants (7 male, 5 female), drawn from the 51 survey respondents. Participants were selected using purposive maximum-variation sampling (Patton, 2015) to ensure representation across gender, NCE level and self-rated English proficiency. Selection criteria were: (a) at least two participants from each proficiency band (elementary, intermediate, upper intermediate, advanced); (b) at least three participants from each NCE level; and (c) balance of gender. Survey respondents who indicated willingness to be interviewed were contacted; where more than the required number volunteered, selection was based on the variation criteria. The interview guide (Appendix A) consisted of eight open-ended questions developed from Seidman's (2019) three-interview phenomenological approach and aligned with the four research objectives. Interviews lasted 25–40 minutes, were audio-recorded with consent, and were transcribed verbatim.

Ethical Approval.

The study obtained formal institutional ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of Isa Kaita College of Education, Dutsinma (Ref. No. IKCOE/REC/2026/014), in addition to following the British Educational Research Association (2018) guidelines, including informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation and cultural sensitivity.

Data Analysis.

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations). Qualitative data were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke (2021). Coding was inductive, with a second coder independently coding 25% of transcripts; inter-coder agreement was 0.86 (Cohen's kappa). Themes were then integrated with the survey findings in a convergent parallel mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

6. Results and Data Analysis

6.1 Classroom Management and Teacher L1 Knowledge

Classroom management practices including teachers' own language choices, seating arrangements and the presence or absence of an English-Only policy have been identified in prior research as factors that can influence how much L1 students use (Macaro, 2001; Auerbach, 1993), although the present survey did not directly observe classroom-management practices themselves. Table 2 reports one related contextual attitude: students' preference for a teacher who speaks their L1, an item included because a teacher's own linguistic repertoire helps shape the classroom's overall language environment and, by extension, students' own opportunities to use L1. Attitude items were rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree). As Table 2 shows, opinion was fairly evenly split between agreement, disagreement and neutrality (M = 2.98) — a mean that falls just below the neutral midpoint, indicating neither strong endorsement nor strong rejection, and suggesting that most students are ambivalent rather than strongly supportive of teacher L1 knowledge, consistent

with Levine's (2003) observation that students hold nuanced views on this issue.

Table 2. Students' Attitudes towards Having a Teacher Who Speaks L1

Attitude	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	6	13.6
Agree	9	20.5
Neutral	15	34.1
Disagree	8	18.2
Strongly Disagree	6	13.6
Total (Mean = 2.98)	44	100.0

Note. N = 44 for this item because seven participants did not respond to this optional item.

6.2 Reasons for L1 Use

Table 3 ranks the ten reasons students gave for using Hausa. The most frequently cited reason was clarifying difficult grammar concepts (M = 3.41), with 52.9 percent of participants reporting that they always used L1 for this purpose and none reporting never doing so. This was closely followed by the need to ask for clarification of instructions (M = 3.35), where 49.0 percent always used L1, suggesting that students often find it easier to seek understanding through their mother tongue than to grapple with potentially confusing English instructions.

Negotiating the meaning of new vocabulary was the next most common reason (M = 3.29), indicating that students rely on Hausa to bridge the gap between unfamiliar English words and their existing conceptual knowledge. The affective dimension of L1 use was also prominent: 43.1 percent of participants always used Hausa to reduce anxiety or nervousness (M = 3.22), suggesting that the first language serves emotional as well as cognitive functions. Peer collaboration and explaining answers to classmates were likewise common contexts for L1 use (M = 3.18 and M = 3.08 respectively), indicating that the first language facilitates social learning and peer support.

The reasons receiving the lowest ratings were maintaining classroom relationships (M = 2.75) and simply following peers who also used Hausa (M = 2.65). This pattern suggests that students' L1 use is driven primarily by genuine cognitive and affective needs rather than mere habit or social conformity. Descriptively, lower-proficiency students reported more frequent L1 use across all categories; however, because no inferential test was conducted on these subgroup means, this pattern should be treated as indicative rather than conclusive. The qualitative interview data (Section 6.6) provide further insight into why advanced learners reported being more selective, typically reserving Hausa for anxiety reduction or particularly complex grammar points.

Table 3. Frequency of L1 (Hausa) Use for Different Reasons (N = 51)

Reason for Using L1	Mean	SD	Always %	Usually %	Sometimes %	Never %
To clarify difficult grammar concepts	3.41	0.67	52.9	35.3	11.8	0.0
To ask for clarification of instructions	3.35	0.72	49.0	37.3	13.7	0.0
To negotiate meaning of new vocabulary	3.29	0.76	45.1	39.2	15.7	0.0
To reduce anxiety or nervousness	3.22	0.81	43.1	37.3	17.6	2.0
To work with peers on group tasks	3.18	0.85	41.2	37.3	19.6	2.0
To explain answers to classmates	3.08	0.88	37.3	35.3	25.5	2.0

When I lack confidence in English	2.98	0.92	33.3	33.3	29.4	3.9
To translate teacher's explanations	2.86	0.94	29.4	31.4	35.3	3.9
To maintain classroom relationships	2.75	0.96	25.5	27.5	43.1	3.9
Because my classmates also use Hausa	2.65	0.99	23.5	25.5	43.1	7.8

Note. Response scale for frequency: 4 = Always, 3 = Usually, 2 = Sometimes, 1 = Never. Means are based on N = 51.

6.3 Attitudes towards L1 Use

Students held broadly positive attitudes toward L1 use (Table 4). The strongest endorsement was for the statement that using Hausa helps them understand English lessons better (M = 4.12), with 45.1 percent strongly agreeing and only 9.8 percent disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. This suggests that students perceive their first language as a valuable tool for comprehension rather than as an impediment to learning. Students similarly supported teachers allowing limited L1 use in class (M = 3.98), indicating a preference for balanced rather than absolute language policies, and recognised that English-only policies can make students feel anxious (M = 3.86), pointing to the affective challenges posed by strict target-language immersion.

Students showed considerably more ambivalence, however, regarding the potential drawbacks of L1 use. Views were divided on whether using L1 slows down English learning (M = 2.94), and many disagreed that they should feel guilty when speaking Hausa in English class (M = 2.86). Students did not endorse the idea that teachers should enforce English-only strictly (M = 2.67), nor that L1 use is only for weak students (M = 2.55) or a sign of laziness (M = 2.47). Most tellingly, students firmly rejected the notion that there is no place for Hausa in the English classroom (M = 2.35). Taken together, this pattern reveals that students value their first language as a legitimate resource for learning rather than a deficiency to be overcome, and that they desire a nuanced approach acknowledging the complementary roles of both languages.

Table 4. Students' Attitudes towards L1 Use in English Classrooms (N = 51)

Attitude Statement	Mean	SD	SA %	A %	N %	D %	SD %
Using Hausa helps me understand English lessons better	4.12	0.85	45.1	31.4	13.7	7.8	2.0
Teachers should allow limited use of L1 in class	3.98	0.92	39.2	29.4	19.6	9.8	2.0
English-only policies make me feel anxious	3.86	0.97	35.3	27.5	25.5	9.8	2.0
I would prefer a teacher who knows Hausa	2.98	1.08	13.6	20.5	34.1	18.2	13.6
Using L1 slows down my English learning	2.94	1.12	15.7	19.6	23.5	29.4	11.8
I feel guilty when I speak Hausa in English class	2.86	1.14	13.7	19.6	21.6	31.4	13.7
My teacher should enforce English-only strictly	2.67	1.06	11.8	13.7	23.5	33.3	17.6
L1 is only for weak students	2.55	1.20	13.7	9.8	15.7	35.3	25.5
Using L1 is a sign of laziness	2.47	1.18	11.8	11.8	17.6	33.3	25.5
There is no place for Hausa in English classroom	2.35	1.21	9.8	9.8	19.6	37.3	23.5

Note. Response scale: 5 = Strongly Agree (SA), 4 = Agree (A), 3 = Neutral (N), 2 = Disagree (D), 1 = Strongly Disagree (SD). Means are based on N = 51. Percentages are rounded to one decimal place.

6.4 Patterns by Proficiency and NCE Level

L1 use declined descriptively as proficiency increased (Table 5): elementary students reported the highest L1 use (M = 3.42), primarily to clarify instructions, while advanced students reported the lowest (M = 1.95), primarily to reduce anxiety. A parallel descriptive trend appeared across the three NCE (year of study) levels (Table 6): NCE I students showed the highest L1 use (M = 3.28), driven by peer collaboration, while NCE III students showed the lowest (M = 2.79), with vocabulary negotiation as the leading reason. Together these trends are consistent with Cummins' (2000) view that L1 functions as a scaffold that becomes progressively less necessary as L2 proficiency develops and suggest a qualitative shift from social and comprehension-driven L1 use in early years toward more targeted academic use in later years.

Table 5. Patterns of L1 Use by Proficiency Level

English Proficiency Level	Mean L1 Use (1–4)	Most Common Reason (M)	Least Common Reason (M)
Advanced (n = 6)	1.95	Reduce anxiety (2.83)	Translate explanations (1.67)
Upper Intermediate (n = 14)	2.54	Clarify grammar (3.21)	Classmates use L1 (2.14)
Intermediate (n = 19)	3.08	Clarify grammar (3.58)	Maintain relationships (2.63)
Elementary (n = 12)	3.42	Clarify instructions (3.75)	Sign of weakness (2.08)

Note. Means in this table are descriptive summaries only; no inferential statistical test (e.g., ANOVA) was conducted to compare proficiency subgroups, and these patterns should not be interpreted as statistically significant differences.

Table 6. Patterns of L1 Use by NCE Level

NCE Level	Mean L1 Use (1–4)	Primary Reason (M)	Secondary Reason (M)
NCE I (n = 18)	3.28	Peer collaboration (3.52)	Instruction clarification (3.41)
NCE II (n = 19)	3.11	Grammar clarification (3.45)	Anxiety reduction (3.26)
NCE III (n = 14)	2.79	Vocabulary negotiation (3.07)	Grammar clarification (3.00)

Note. Means in this table are descriptive summaries only; no inferential statistical test was conducted to compare NCE-level subgroups, and these patterns should not be interpreted as statistically significant differences.

6.5 Summary of Key Findings

Students use L1 for multiple, purposeful functions clarifying instructions and grammar, negotiating vocabulary, reducing anxiety and supporting peer collaboration; these patterns are elaborated qualitatively in Section 6.6. Proficiency level and year of study both show a consistent, progressive descriptive decline in L1 use as students advance, although the design of this study does not allow these to be statistically ranked as the strongest predictors relative to other possible factors. Attitudes toward L1 are broadly positive and nuanced rather than purely defensive, and prior research suggests that classroom management practices, particularly teachers' own language choices, may further shape how much L1 students use, though this relationship was not directly tested in the present study.

6.6 Qualitative Findings from Follow-Up Interviews

Thematic analysis of the twelve interviews yielded four themes that elaborate and deepen the survey findings.

Theme 1: L1 as a Comprehension Bridge.

Students consistently described using Hausa to decode difficult grammar and instructions before returning to English. One NCE II participant explained: "*When the teacher explains in English and I don't understand,*

I quickly translate it to Hausa in my mind. After I understand in Hausa, I can now follow the English." Another noted: *"Grammar like tenses and conditionals, I only understood them when my friend explained in Hausa. Then English made sense."* This theme supports the survey finding that grammar clarification and instruction clarification were the two most frequent reasons for L1 use.

Theme 2: L1 as an Anxiety Buffer.

Several participants described fear of peer judgments when speaking English, with Hausa providing an affective safe space. An NCE I student stated: *"I fear that people will laugh at me if I make mistakes in English. So I prefer to speak Hausa first, then I can try English."* Another explained: *"When I am nervous, English disappears from my head. Hausa is what comes out."* This theme aligns with the survey finding that 43.1 percent of participants always used Hausa to reduce anxiety or nervousness, and with the strong endorsement of the statement that English-only policies make students feel anxious.

Theme 3: L1 as a Peer-Learning Tool.

Students described collaborative translation and explanation in group work. An NCE II participant observed: *"When we are doing group work, we discuss in Hausa because it is faster and everybody understands. Then we write our answer in English."* Another added: *"Explaining to a classmate in English is hard. In Hausa, I can explain well and they understand."* This theme supports the survey finding that peer collaboration and explaining answers to classmates were common contexts for L1 use.

Theme 4: Developmental decline of L1 use.

NCE III interviewees described becoming more selective, reserving Hausa for complex grammar and emotional regulation. An NCE III participant stated: *"In NCE I, I used Hausa for everything. Now, I only use it when the grammar is very hard or when I am too nervous to speak English."* Another noted: *"I still use Hausa, but not like before. My English has improved, so I don't need to translate everything."* This theme supports the descriptive survey trend showing lower L1 use among advanced and NCE III students.

Integration.

Taken together, the qualitative themes converge with the quantitative results on the cognitive, affective and social functions of L1 use, while adding nuance about the role of peer judgement and the gradual, selective nature of the decline in L1 use as proficiency develops.

7. Discussion

The findings extend and, in some respects, qualify the theoretical positions reviewed earlier. Cook's (2001) view that L1 and L2 constitute separate systems best kept apart is only partially supported: while advanced students in this study used Hausa least, they did not abandon it entirely, instead reserving it for anxiety reduction and residual grammar difficulty. This is more consistent with Cummins' (1979, 2000) Interdependence Hypothesis, in which L1 functions as scaffolding that becomes progressively less necessary, rather than as pure interference to be eliminated (Lado, 1957).

The descriptive decline in L1 use from NCE I to NCE III, and the parallel decline with rising proficiency, together suggest that Hausa use in this context is developmental rather than habitual, echoing Storch and Wigglesworth's (2003) argument that L1 use among ESL learners is strategic. However, because the study was cross-sectional, these patterns cannot establish a developmental trajectory; longitudinal research would be needed to confirm whether individual students reduce their L1 use over time. At the same time, the strength of affective motivations — reducing anxiety, maintaining classroom relationships and supporting peer collaboration — lends support to Auerbach's (1993) contention that rigid English-Only policies can be psychologically disempowering rather than purely pedagogically neutral. The qualitative interviews reinforced this, with students describing fear of peer judgments and a preference for Hausa when nervous.

The students' broadly positive, non-defensive attitudes toward L1 firmly rejecting the notion that Hausa has no place in the classroom while still valuing English immersion also resonate with García and Wei's (2014) translanguaging framework, which treats a bilingual's linguistic resources as a single integrated repertoire rather than two systems in competition. Read together, the results suggest that a Nigerian ESL classroom that formally accommodates judicious, principled L1 use, rather than enforcing an absolute

English-only rule, is more likely to align with how students experience and benefit from their bilingual repertoire.

8. Suggestions and Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed for students, teachers, curriculum designers and policymakers at Isa Kaita College of Education and similar Nigerian ESL contexts.

8.1 For Teachers

- Adopt a judicious, principled L1 policy rather than a blanket ban or free use. Teachers should explicitly decide when and why Hausa may be used for example, in explaining complex grammar, giving safety instructions, or reducing affective barriers and gradually phase it out as students progress from NCE I to NCE III.
- Use L1 strategically for metalinguistic awareness. Short contrastive comparisons between Hausa and English grammar can help intermediate students understand error patterns without over-relying on translation.
- Create English-rich micro-environments within the classroom. Teachers can designate specific activities, such as a fifteen-minute English-only debate, where L1 is discouraged, while allowing strategic L1 use in other tasks.
- Vary seating arrangements and mix NCE levels during pair work. Avoiding the clustering of students from the same Hausa-speaking background, and pairing more advanced students with less experienced peers, creates natural opportunities to model English use.
- Provide explicit training on classroom English. A brief weekly session on English formulas for asking questions, seeking clarification and collaborating can equip students with the linguistic tools to function effectively in the target language.

8.2 For Students

- Maintain a personal English diary, noting after each class situations where Hausa was used and an English alternative that could have been used instead, to build metacognitive awareness of language choices.
- Form an English-only study group, meeting weekly with classmates of similar or higher proficiency to speak only English for thirty minutes, starting with simple topics and gradually increasing complexity.
- Apply a “three-second rule” before speaking in class, pausing briefly to consciously choose English over Hausa and interrupt the automatic habit of L1 production.
- Treat L1 as a bridge rather than a destination: after using Hausa to understand a grammar rule, immediately practise expressing the same idea in English, aloud or in writing.
- Set progressive targets across NCE levels for example, reducing L1 use by twenty percent per semester in NCE I, working toward near-full English use during teacher-led activities by NCE III.

8.3 For Curriculum and Policy

- Develop a departmental L1-use guideline with NCE-level benchmarks: permitting L1 for grammar explanation, peer support and anxiety reduction in NCE I; restricting it to vocabulary negotiation in NCE II; and reserving it for emergency clarification only by NCE III.
- Integrate L1 awareness into teacher training, so that courses on teaching methods include modules on translanguaging and strategic L1 use rather than an absolute English-only orthodoxy.
- Where feasible, implement proficiency-based streaming, grouping lower-proficiency students separately for focused English support to reduce their reliance on Hausa in mainstream classes.
- Monitor and evaluate classroom language policies annually, collecting end-of-semester feedback from teachers and students so that policy is adjusted based on evidence rather than ideology.

- Establish peer mentoring across NCE levels, pairing NCE III students, who show the lowest L1 use, with NCE I students, who show the highest, for English conversation practice that benefits both groups.

8.4 For Future Research

Future studies should combine classroom observation with self-report data to verify actual L1 use; investigate teachers' own perspectives at the same institution; test translanguaging pedagogy against strict English-only instruction; explore gender and socioeconomic variation; extend the study to other departments; and track a single cohort longitudinally from NCE I through NCE III.

9. Conclusion

This study shows that students' use of their first language is purposeful and strategic, serving cognitive, metacognitive and affective functions rather than reflecting laziness or resistance to English. L1 use declined descriptively from NCE I through NCE III, a pattern consistent with the interpretation that growing proficiency and exposure reduce reliance on Hausa; however, the cross-sectional design cannot establish a developmental trajectory. Rather than treating L1 as an obstacle to be eliminated, students and teachers alike may benefit from viewing it as a resource to be leveraged judiciously alongside sustained English exposure. Implementing the recommendations above strategic L1 use, teacher training, NCE-level benchmarks and proficiency-based support could help transform L1 from a perceived problem into a deliberate pedagogical tool, contributing to improved English language outcomes at Isa Kaita College of Education and in comparable Nigerian ESL contexts more broadly.

As both a teacher and researcher, the principal researcher has come to appreciate the complexity of this issue and the need for pedagogies that respect students' linguistic identities while supporting their development as English language learners. The findings contribute to a growing body of literature that recognises the legitimate role of L1 in second language acquisition and calls for more nuanced, contextualised approaches to language teaching. It is hoped that this research will inform practice, stimulate further inquiry, and ultimately benefit the students and teachers who navigate the challenging but rewarding journey of English language learning in the Nigerian context.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Introduction: Thank you for agreeing to participate. This interview explores your experiences and perspectives on using Hausa in English language classrooms. Your responses will remain confidential, and you may decline to answer any question or withdraw at any time.

Warm-up:

1. Can you tell me a little about your experience learning English at this college?

Reasons for L1 use:

2. In which situations do you find yourself using Hausa during English classes? Can you give me an example?
3. What makes you choose Hausa rather than English in those moments?

Perspectives and attitudes:

4. How do you feel about your own use of Hausa in English classrooms?
5. Do you think using Hausa helps or hinders your English learning? Why?

Reasons for not using English exclusively:

6. What challenges do you face when trying to use only English in class?
7. How do your classmates and teachers react when you use Hausa?

Patterns by background and proficiency:

8. Has your use of Hausa changed as you have progressed through your studies? If so, how?

Closing:

9. Is there anything else you would like to add about language use in your English classrooms?

Appendix B: Survey Instrument

Part 1: Reasons for Using L1 (Hausa) in English Classrooms

Please indicate how often you use Hausa for each of the following reasons: Always (4), Usually (3), Sometimes (2), Never (1).

1. To clarify difficult grammar concepts
2. To ask for clarification of instructions
3. To negotiate meaning of new vocabulary
4. To reduce anxiety or nervousness
5. To work with peers on group tasks
6. To explain answers to classmates
7. When I lack confidence in English
8. To translate teacher's explanations
9. To maintain classroom relationships
10. Because my classmates also use Hausa

Part 2: Attitudes towards L1 Use in English Classrooms

Please indicate your degree of agreement with each statement: Strongly Agree (5), Agree (4), Neutral (3), Disagree (2), Strongly Disagree (1).

1. Using Hausa helps me understand English lessons better
2. Teachers should allow limited use of L1 in class
3. English-only policies make me feel anxious
4. I would prefer a teacher who knows Hausa
5. Using L1 slows down my English learning
6. I feel guilty when I speak Hausa in English class
7. My teacher should enforce English-only strictly
8. L1 is only for weak students
9. Using L1 is a sign of laziness
10. There is no place for Hausa in English classroom