

# Using Students' First Language in the EFL Classroom

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It is important to use English in the classroom as the target language and as the teaching language. There are times, however, when the limited use of the students' first language can be useful. As an example, there are times when a complex idea cannot be easily explained, and no one gets it. Be careful though as some native speakers lose their value when they begin teaching in the L1.

Most EFL students have already studied English for years in their L1, but still can't speak fluently. The more you use a student's L1, the more you lose your value as a native speaker and in most cases, a major factor in your hire was that you were a native speaker. If you don't use that skill and ability, they might as well hire a local teacher for half of what you cost.

An example from a few years ago when I was teaching at a university in Korea that had a liberal policy about keeping foreigners for longer periods of time. Toward the end of my three years there, a French native speaker (he was teaching French) was told that his contract would not be renewed. He had worked there for about 12 years and was very angry about being let go. Not having your contract renewed is pretty much the way university teachers are fired.

What was the problem? He had during his time in Korea become very fluent in Korean, a fact of which he was quite proud. The problem was that he was teaching his classes mostly in Korean, not in French. In a discrete manner I asked some of my students about his classes (some of my students studied several languages) and they did not like his teaching methods. They felt they weren't getting enough French.

If you walk the hallways of a primary, secondary, or tertiary school in most countries and listen in on the English classes, you will hear local teachers TALKING about English in the first language. You can hear many teachers, many classes that are almost all in the L1. While living in those same countries, you will see many television programs teaching English by talking about it in the L1. No wonder the students have difficulty becoming fluent. They almost never get to listen to the L2 and even more rarely get to talk in the L2.

Language learning just doesn't happen that way. You don't learn to swim by talking about it. At some point, you have to get in the water and swim. Help your students by teaching in the L2 and don't devalue yourself as a native speaker by not using the very thing you were hired for: your skills in English.