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In-Text Citation: (Zulkiflee & Sulaiman, 2022)
To Cite this Article: Zulkiflee, Z. N., & Sulaiman, N. A. (2022). Teachers' Preferences on L1 and L2 Use in Malaysian Primary ESL Classrooms. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, *12*(12), 2839 – 2851.

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Teachers' Preferences on L1 and L2 Use in Malaysian Primary ESL Classrooms

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Abstract
The usage of L1 and L2 in ESL Classrooms has been on an ongoing debate over the decades. As teachers are responsible for the learners' learning experiences from urban and rural schools in Malaysia, it is crucial to investigate the teachers' preferences of L1 and L2 usage since there is no apparent agreement on whether L1 hinders or helps in ESL classrooms regardless of massive research efforts. This study attempts to fill the gaps on teachers' preferences on L1 and L2 use in Malaysian primary ESL classrooms of both rural and urban schools. It aims to explore the language preferences of teachers in various situations either L1 or L2 in different settings. The study employs a quantitative approach in which an online survey was done with 30 primary ESL teachers through purposive sampling. 36 from 158 questions of Chavez's questionnaire are adapted according to the suitability of this study. Data gathered were analysed using frequencies and percentages. The findings show that L2 is used by the respondents from rural and urban primary schools for most situations with slight differences in terms of number of items and percentages. Despite the strong preferences of L2 usage, there are variations of L1 use in certain situations especially for teachers from rural schools. It is shown that teachers are still inclined towards 'English-only' approach but L1 remains inseparable in ESL primary classrooms. Thus, future research proposed includes the recommendation for another study to be done on a larger scale of respondents and studies that investigate teachers' preferences based on specific reasons of switching the language such as translanguaging, code-mixing, code-switching or other diglossic approach.
Keywords: L1, L2, English as a Second Language (ESL), Rural, Urban

Introduction
Over the past years, vast number of literatures discussed about the usage of first language (L1) and second language (L2) in ESL classrooms. Malaysia is a melting pot of different races, cultures, cultural practices, religions and languages. It is recognised for its uniquely blended multicultural and multilingual population which consists of three major ethnic groups; Malay (50.4%), Chinese (23.7%) and Indian (7.1%) (Faiz & Mohamed, 2022). Malaysians are usually bilingual or multilingual because of a complex linguistic and cultural background together with the need for a national language known as Bahasa Melayu or Bahasa Malaysia (BM). English used to be the medium of instruction during the period of British colonisation before it was replaced by Bahasa Melayu after independence in 1957 (Pandian, 2002). Despite not being

the national language, English is still widely used and now it is a compulsory subject in the Malaysian education system. In Malaysia, L1 may differ according to various factors such as races and language exposure. According to Darmi et al. (2018), the mother tongue or L1 of most Malays is BM which is Malaysia's official language. Mandarin is well known as the L1 for Chinese and Tamil is the L1 for Indians. As one of the main subjects being taught in schools, Malaysians considered English Language as the L2.

The national language or BM has a strong influence over the learning of English among Malaysian learners (Musa & Azman, 2012). L1 and L2 provide noticeably assorted functions and several research had proven that diverse roles are being played by L1 and L2 in language classrooms (Blyth, 1995; Chavez, 2003). However, some practitioners and researchers viewed the use of L1 in ESL classrooms as detrimental to the learning and acquisition process of the language learners. A strictly monolingual classroom applied the paradox of monolingualism for the goal of bilingualism to be achieved (Chavez, 2003). Meanwhile, L1 usage is supported and its role in ESL teaching methods are recognised by several language practitioners (Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Cook, 2001; Howatt, 2004; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). The usage of L1 in ESL classrooms is inevitable. According to Darmi et al (2018), Malaysian ESL teachers are still conceded to have mutual belief in the prominence of the 'English only' approach. Instead of totally prohibiting the learners from using L1, teachers may regard L1 as a facilitating role in ESL classrooms.

According to Inbar-Lourie (2010), even though L1 has been proposed as a support for the learners' L2 learning or target language, teachers across bilingual and multilingual contexts still believe in language separation. There is no apparent agreement on whether L1 hinders or helps in ESL classrooms regardless of the massive research efforts. As teachers are responsible of the learning experiences of learners from both urban and rural schools in Malaysia, who need to undergo their schooling years learning English Language, it is crucial to investigate the teachers' preferences of L1 and L2 usage. An effective teacher may be understood as one who helps in development of the basic skills, proper work habits, desirable attitudes, value judgments and adequate personal adjustment of the learners (Ramachandran & Veerasekaran, 2017). Having distinctive challenges confronting teachers from urban and rural schools, teachers' preferences of L1 and L2 use in both settings remained relatively underexplored. This study reviews teachers' preferences in confronting language classrooms with the usage of L1 and L2 in both, rural and urban areas specifically in primary schools. The objective of the study is to investigate language preference of teachers teaching in Malaysian primary ESL classroom in rural and urban schools.

Methodology
A quantitative approach was employed to investigate the teachers' preferences of L1 and L2 usage in Malaysian primary ESL classrooms involving both rural and urban schools. A survey design was chosen to enable the researcher to collect the data from the intended respondents in a relatively short period since this study was conducted using a quantitative approach. Creswell (2013) stated that survey design would assist the researchers in recognising samples' opinions, attitudes, behaviours or features. The adaptation of Chavez's questionnaire (2003) into online survey questionnaire was done to study teachers' preference of L1 and L2 usage in different situations.

36 from 158 questions of Chavez's (2003) questionnaire are adapted according to the suitability of this study. As this study mainly focuses on teacher's preferences, only questions involving teachers are used and adapted to fit the situation which exclude questions regarding

learners' observed and desired language use. *Google Form* is used as a tool of online version of the survey. The questionnaire consists of two parts which are the demographic of the respondents and the 36 questions with two answer options of L1 and L2. The adaptation involved the decision of using L1 and L2 as answer options instead of using 5 Likert-scale. Another adaptation includes the arrangement of the items which was done according to the teacher's activities in the ESL classroom. The examination part was also changed into assessment considering the abolishment of examination in Malaysian primary schools. The instrument provided was used to reflect on the evaluation of the teachers' language preferences for described situations.

In this survey, all respondents are primary school teachers in Malaysia ranging from 21 years old to 60 years old. The respondents must at least be bilinguals with Malay, Chinese and Tamil as their L1 or mother tongue and English as their L2. In ensuring the sample to retain the characteristics stated, purposive sampling is employed. The link was shared to ESL teachers in rural and urban primary schools. The data collection was gathered from 15 primary ESL teacher in rural schools and 15 from urban schools via an online survey link. A record of 39 responses in total were received but only 30 were appropriate following the sample characteristics set. As the responses were attained from the instrument administered, the calculation of percentages and frequency were computed.

Findings and Discussions

The findings of this study are portrayed in the tables which provide the answers to the objectives of this study. The analysis is followed by the interpretation and discussion based on the findings. The discussions from the analysed findings revolve around the language preference of teachers teaching in rural and urban schools in ESL classrooms.

Table 1

Teachers' Preferences of L1 Use in Rural Primary ESL Classroom

No.	Items	Rural	
	Which language does the teacher use when…?	L1 (n) %	L2 (n) %
6.	explaining about the culture in general i.e. not directly related to a homework	10 **66.7**	5 33.3
17.	asking pupils (in class) about how the lesson is going for them	8 **53.3**	7 46.7
24.	going around and talking to pupils as they do group or pair work	8 **53.3**	7 46.7
31.	making small talk with the class	9 **60**	6 40
32.	joking with the class	10 **66.7**	5 33.3
33.	making small talk with a particular pupil	8 **53.3**	7 46.7
34.	joking with a particular pupil	8 **53.3**	7 46.7
35.	in office hours (outside class)	12 **80**	3 20
36.	you run into pupils outside of class, by chance	9 **60**	6 40

Table 1 contains 9 items of higher percentages in L1 use compared to L2 by teachers in ESL rural classrooms. Teachers from rural schools preferred to use L1 in certain situations particularly the 9 items shown above. The percentage is between 53.3% and 80%. Despite the preference for these situations, the differences are not that distinct considering only 1 person of difference between L1 and L2 preferences.

Table 2
Teachers' Preferences of L1 Use in Urban Primary ESL Classroom

No.	Items	Urban	
	Which language does the teacher use when…?	L1 (n) %	L2 (n) %
31.	making small talk with the class	8 **53.3**	7 46.7
32.	joking with the class	10 **66.7**	5 33.3
33.	making small talk with a particular pupil	8 **53.3**	7 46.7
34.	joking with a particular pupil	8 **53.3**	7 46.7
35.	in office hours (outside class)	9 **60**	6 40
36.	you run into pupils outside of class, by chance	8 **53.3**	7 46.7

Table 2 displays 6 items involving the interaction between teachers and pupils in urban ESL classroom. Teachers from urban schools preferred to use L1 (Malay) in 6 situations according to the table above. However, the percentage is only between 53.3% to 66.7% which had proven that the preferences for these particular situations are not that conclusive.

Teachers of the rural schools show the highest percentage of 80% for item 35 which is the preferred language use of L1 while interacting outside of the classroom during office hours. From the findings of several studies, Chavez (2003) revealed that the usage of L1 by teachers assist in lessen learners' anxiety and establish good rapport with them. In this regard, this has given the idea of developing positive relationships with the pupils as L1 is closer to the pupils' hearts. Not only item 35, but other items (item 31, 32, 33, 34 and 36) involving the socialising process had also shown high preference of L1 compared to L2 from both settings – rural and urban schools. Item 31 (making small talk with the class), item 32 (joking with the class), item 33 (making small talk with a particular pupil), item 34 (joking with a particular pupil) and item 36 (run into pupils outside of class, by chance) are the representation of social settings in the interaction between the teachers and pupils that involve L1. A similar situation portrayed in research done by Chavez (2003) that pupils were inclined towards the usage of L1 throughout the absence of classroom setting such as during recess or outside of the classroom. Forman (2015) denoted that these occurrences may be seen as being a product of teachers' existing interpersonal relations with pupils being enacted within familiar pedagogic discourses. Thus, their familiarity requires less attention and energy for teachers as the use of L1 is associated with conventional relations.

Furthermore, teachers in both settings prefer to use L1 while socialising with the pupils with the addition of three other items from the analysed responses received by the rural

teachers which are item 6 (explaining about the culture in general i.e. not directly related to a homework), item 17 (asking pupils in class about how the lesson is going for them) and item 24 (going around and talking to pupils as they do group or pair work). Tekin and Garton (2020) highlighted that the L1 assists in supporting learners' pronunciation, meeting learners' personalised needs when the necessity occurs, better engaging them in the class (particularly less able ones) and therefore developing motivation. In addition to facilitating learners' language learning, L1 also provides chances for learners to succeed in the pair work or group work without continuously focusing merely on L2 use (Carless, 2008). The situation in rural schools especially involving culture, religion and lifestyle is different. Thus, in order for teachers to win their hearts in learning English language, it is important to reduce the affective filter first and build their confidence in learning a new language. Besides, items 17 and 24 involve teachers' effort to assist pupils with their comprehension. One of the ways is to use their L1 to ensure they understand the questions and the follow-up done by the teachers. Pupils' confidence level would be boosted and they would be comfortable to use more of L2 when teachers provide positive classroom environment without any additional pressure.

Table 3
Teachers' Preferences of L2 Use in Rural Primary ESL Classroom

No.	Items	Rural	
	Which language does the teacher use when…?	**L1 (n) %**	**L2 (n) %**
10.	performing routines such as greeting pupils, saying which page to look at, etc	0 0	15 **100**
18.	on grammar hand outs	1 6.7	14 **93.3**
29.	giving written feedback on pupils' speaking performance	1 6.7	14 **93.3**

There are 3 items in Table 3. The items represent the situations that the teachers express particularly strong preference of L2 use in rural schools. The findings overall refer to L2 as the most preferred language for the teachers but these three items represent stringer preference of L2 with convincing percentages of 93.3% - 100%.

Table 4

Teachers' Preferences of L2 Use in Urban Primary ESL Classroom

No.	Items	Urban	
	Which language does the teacher use when…?	**L1 (n) %**	**L2 (n) %**
10.	performing routines such as greeting pupils, saying which page to look at,etc	0 0	15 **100**
13.	conducting grammar practice	1 6.7	14 **93.3**
16.	conducting vocabulary practice	0 0	15 **100**
17.	asking pupils (in class) about how the lesson is going for them	1 6.7	14 **93.3**
27.	giving written feedback on pupils' written work	0 0	15 **100**
29.	giving written feedback on pupils' speaking performance	0 0	15 **100**

Table 4 shows 6 items representing the situations that the teachers express particularly strong preference of L2 use in urban schools. There are 6 items of convincing percentages between 93.3% to 100% that show higher number of items compared to 3 items of L2 strong preferences in rural school.

Malaysian teachers are well-known of using the L2 also known as the target language while teaching. In this discovery, L2 is preferred in most situations with 4 items of the highest percentages 100% which are item 10 (performing routines such as greeting pupils, saying which page to look at, etc), item 16 (conducting vocabulary practice), item 27 (giving written feedback on pupils' written work) and item 29 (giving written feedback on pupils' speaking performance). The other three items of L2 high preference consist of item 13 (conducting grammar practice), item 17 (asking pupils about how the lesson is going for them in class) and item 18 (on grammar handouts). Both teachers in rural and urban schools prefer to use L2 for several items stated with three additional items from urban school teachers. Hüseyin and Karaazmak (2019) highlighted that it can be better to limit the use of L1 to increase the exposure to the target language especially in the classrooms consisting of pupils with a high level of English proficiency. In fact, they also stated that teachers should be even more careful about the amount of L1 use in lower proficiency level classes. Therefore, it is undeniable that despite the ongoing debates, the emphasis on the 'English only' approach in English language classes is still a common belief among many Malaysian ESL teachers (Darmi et al., 2018).

Table 5

Teachers' Language Preferences of either L1 or L2 for Different Situations in Rural and Urban Schools

No.	Items	Rural		Urban	
	Which language does the teacher use when…?	L1 (n) %	L2 (n) %	L1 (n) %	L2 (n) %
1.	explaining the syllabus at the beginning of the English Language class	6 40	9 **60**	2 13.3	13 **86.7**
2.	explaining background information before playing an audio or video tape	5 33.3	10 **66.7**	4 26.7	11 **73.3**
3.	explaining background information before a reading homework	6 40	9 **60**	2 13.3	13 **86.7**
4.	explaining what pupils should do at home	7 46.7	8 **53.3**	5 33.3	10 **66.7**
5.	going over homework which had been assigned for today	5 33.3	10 **66.7**	4 26.7	11 **73.3**
6.	explaining about the culture in general i.e. not directly related to a homework	10 **66.7**	5 33.3	6 40	9 **60**
7.	explaining about an upcoming assessment	7 46.7	8 **53.3**	5 33.3	10 **66.7**
8.	explaining an assessment that pupils are taking	6 40	9 **60**	7 46.7	8 **53.3**
9.	reviewing a past assessment	5 33.3	10 **66.7**	3 20	12 **80**
10.	performing routines such as greeting pupils, saying which page to look at, etc	0 0	15 **100**	0 0	15 **100**
11.	talking about a new grammar point	4 26.7	11 **73.3**	5 33.3	10 **66.7**
12.	reviewing grammar that the class has already covered earlier	2 13.3	13 **86.7**	3 20	12 **80**
13.	conducting grammar practice	3 20	12 **80**	1 6.7	14 **93.3**
14.	introducing new vocabulary	6 40	9 **60**	4 26.7	11 **73.3**
15.	reviewing vocabulary which the class has already covered earlier	4 26.7	11 **73.3**	2 13.3	13 **86.7**
16.	conducting vocabulary practice	3 20	12 **80**	0 0	15 **100**
17.	asking pupils (in class) about how the lesson is going for them	8 **53.3**	7 46.7	1 6.7	14 **93.3**
18.	on grammar hand outs	1 6.7	14 **93.3**	2 13.3	13 **86.7**
19.	on vocabulary hand outs	2 13.3	13 **86.7**	2 13.3	13 **86.7**

No.	Situation				
20.	on hand outs for interaction (e.g., role-play discussion etc.)	4 / 26.7	11 / **73.3**	3 / 20	12 / **80**
21.	giving directions for group or pair work	6 / 40	9 / **60**	5 / 33.3	10 / **66.7**
22.	leading a discussion on issues raised in an audio or video tape	5 / 33.3	10 / **66.7**	6 / 40	9 / **60**
23.	leading a discussion on issues raised in a reading text	6 / 40	9 / **60**	6 / 40	9 / **60**
24.	going around and talking to pupils as they do group or pair work	8 / **53.3**	7 / 46.7	2 / 13.3	13 / **86.7**
25.	checking pupils' comprehension of a reading homework	7 / 46.7	8 / **53.3**	2 / 13.3	13 / **86.7**
26.	checking pupils' comprehension of an audio or video tape	5 / 33.3	10 / **66.7**	4 / 26.7	11 / **73.3**
27.	giving written feedback on pupils' written work	2 / 13.3	13 / **86.7**	0 / 0	15 / **100**
28.	giving oral feedback on pupils' written work in speaking	4 / 26.7	11 / **73.3**	4 / 26.7	11 / **73.3**
29.	giving written feedback on pupils' speaking performance	1 / 6.7	14 / **93.3**	0 / 0	15 / **100**
30.	giving oral feedback on pupils' speaking performance	4 / 26.7	11 / **73.3**	3 / 20	12 / **80**
31.	making small talk with the class	9 / **60**	6 / 40	8 / **53.3**	7 / 46.7
32.	joking with the class	10 / **66.7**	5 / 33.3	10 / **66.7**	5 / 33.3
33.	making small talk with a particular pupil	8 / **53.3**	7 / 46.7	8 / **53.3**	7 / 46.7
34.	joking with a particular pupil	8 / **53.3**	7 / 46.7	8 / **53.3**	7 / 46.7
35.	in office hours (outside class)	12 / **80**	3 / 20	9 / **60**	6 / 40
36.	you run into pupils outside of class, by chance	9 / **60**	6 / 40	8 / **53.3**	7 / 46.7

By referring to Table 5, there are 36 items of the situations that teachers are facing while interacting with the pupils inside and outside the classroom. Based on Table 3, it is revealed that all teachers in rural schools preferred to use L2 except for 9 situations (item 6, 17, 24, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36). Meanwhile, teachers in urban schools preferred to use L2 for all situations except for 6 situations (item 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36). The percentage varied from 6.7% to 100%. The overall findings that teachers from both settings preferred L2 compared to L1 with slight differences in terms of number of situations by referring to the items in the table above.

Despite the preference for certain situations discussed in the previous sections, the difference is not that distinct considering the percentages of the findings. According to Tekin and Gardon (2020), monolingual language teaching refers to an almost total refrainment of L1 usage in classrooms and the language learning optimum approach is the L2 full exposure.

For instance, it is deemed as the norm and current methods such as Communicative Language Teaching and Task-Based Language Learning and Teaching embrace it (Bruen & Kelly, 2016). These methods are used in Malaysia for several years which now has been reflected upon the findings of this study since L2 input is the utmost importance for successful language learning (Ellis, 2008). Although several facilitative roles the L1 plays in ESL classrooms, the notion of creating an input-rich environment to prepare learners with optimal opportunities for meaningful use of the target language suggested by Kim and Elder (2008) remain supreme.

Conclusion

The objective of this study was to explore the language preference of teachers teaching in rural and urban schools in Malaysian primary ESL classrooms. The analysis of the teachers' responses revealed that L2 or English is the most preferred language in majority of the situations involving interaction with the pupils in ESL primary classrooms. Nevertheless, considering the distinct language learning settings affected by several aspects such as the proficiency level of both teachers and learners, motivation, class size and age of the learners, it appears to be incongruous to form a general, one-size-fits-all theory (Tekin & Garton, 2020). In fact, L1 is still preferred to be used in certain situations especially when it comes to social setting. Teachers tend to switch to L1 when the interaction takes place in informal setting or happen outside of the classroom. In addition, there are subtle differences of L1 usage in in rural school such as when it involves culture and when the teachers are doing comprehension check with the pupils. Utilisation of L1 in classroom is regarded as scaffolding process when implementing activities in L2 because it assists pupils in solving problems and understanding tasks (Liao, 2006).

The use of L1 in L2 classes has long been debated in the ESL primary classrooms. Although the sample of this study involve both rural and urban teachers, no generalisation can be drawn due to the small sample size. While numerous studies have been carried out in different settings to explore the language preferences among teachers, research in primary school settings remains moderately rare especially in rural areas. Despite the drawbacks, it can be said that the findings of this study provide expedient information that may contribute to the understanding of language preferences of teacher teaching in Malaysian primary ESL classroom from rural and urban schools. Thus, teachers from both rural and urban schools play important roles in providing effective teaching and learning of English Language without neglecting the positive impacts of L1 and L2 use depending on the cultural background and proficiency level of L2 pupils. From this study, it can be concluded that despite the massive use of L2 in the classrooms, L1 is an inseparable part of the L2 considering the revelation of L1 preference in the findings provided and every teacher has their own exceptional way of utilising it either in rural or urban school. The findings and discussions of this study lead the implications for future research with the recommendation for another study to be done on a larger scale of respondents and studies that investigate teachers' preferences based on specific reasons of switching the language such as translanguaging, code-switching or other diglossic approach.

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