Role of the First Language in Second Language Writing Instructions: Kazakhstani Teachers' Opinions

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Abstract
Purpose. This study aimed to explore the use of a bilingual approach in teaching English within the higher education system of Kazakhstan. The study investigates the role of the first language (L1) in the process of foreign language instruction, specifically English. The objective was to examine the perspectives of English language instructors regarding the use of L1 in the teaching of L2 writing skills. Methodology Adopting a mixed method research design, the study collected the opinions of university English teachers concerning the use of Kazakh in teaching students academic writing in English data, through an online survey. The collected data was compared with existing international practices, making it an experimental study conducted with a multilingual group having Kazakh as medium of instruction. Results The study revealed the effectiveness of the bilingual approach in teaching English writing skills at the initial stage of language learning. It was found that 90% of the participants use L1 (Kazakh) when teaching writing in English, which supports students in memorizing new vocabulary needed for constructing written texts, besides using the translation method for word combinations. Implications for research and practice. The study implies to implement more effectively bilingual instruction in foreign language writing within Kazakhstan's multilingual society. Furthermore, deeper investigations and analysis into current practices of teaching English writing skills is required in both monolingual and multilingual groups.

Keywords: Bilingualism, second language acquisition, first language, Kazakh language, English language.

Introduction

Bilingual teaching involves presenting educational materials in two languages with one of them usually being the native language of students. Statistics show that there are approximately more than 3 billion bilingual people in the world, accounting to 43% of the global population (Grosjean, 2022). The acquisition of two languages is not just an advantage but has become a necessity and key driver of progress with the expanding global communication landscape in the modern world (Khassanov et al., 2024). Kazakhstan is a multinational country of more than 130 nationalities. The country which is officially recognized as a bilingual nation, (Khassanov et al., 2024), actively promotes multilingualism in the education system by implementing the state project "Trinity of languages" where the English language is developing at the state level (Khassanov et al., 2024). The main target of this program is to enhance the linguistic competence of citizens, increasing the number of individuals speaking three languages which is particularly relevant for higher education. In this regard, the bilingual teaching method becomes one of the priority strategies ensuring successful mastery of a foreign language.

In the context of multilingualism in Kazakhstan, the bilingual method serves as one of the effective methods in teaching English. Acquiring a second language is a complex process which interconnects different

fields of science, such as linguistics, sociolinguistics, cognitive science, psychology, pedagogy etc. Hence, innovative instructional strategies and methods are being adopted to facilitate the learning process and enhance its effectiveness. The bilingual method is widely recognized due to its cognitive and social benefits (Kim et al., 2022). The successful application of this method requires examination of its definition, historical development and primary goals.

Foreign languages learning is a part of bilingual programs. Bilingual education is a type of program where multiple languages are used for teaching purposes. In pedagogy, the bilingual method refers to the use of two languages in the educational process to achieve a high level of language proficiency among learners (Adams, 2020). Within the context of higher education in Kazakhstan, the development of written competence in English is of particular importance, especially for elementary and intermediate-level students (A2-B1) who are just starting to grasp the fundamentals of academic writing. Studies indicate that the application of the bilingual method contributes to effective grammar learning, vocabulary expansion, text structuring skills, and increased confidence in using English. Furthermore, bilingual instruction helps overcome language barriers, facilitates the transition from the native language to English, and aids in the comprehension of complex linguistic structures.

In Kazakhstan, bilingual education has already been introduced in several universities; however, its effectiveness in English language instruction requires further examination. Studies (Boey, 1969; De Houwer, 2005; Han & Park, 2017; Wallin & Cheevakumjorn, 2020) indicate that the bilingual method is particularly beneficial in the early stages of learning English (A2-B1 levels), as it allows students to use their native language to support comprehension of new linguistic structures. This approach facilitates a gradual transition from the native language to full immersion in English.

Writing proficiency is one of the most challenging aspects of foreign language acquisition. The bilingual method enables a smoother development of writing structures, as students can analyze textual constructions in both languages. This approach accounts for differences in grammatical systems and reduces cognitive load when composing texts in English. International studies also highlight the importance of the bilingual method in shaping academic writing competence.(Erzighitovna & Idrisovna, 2025) states that applying a bilingual approach increases students' confidence in writing, as they can rely on their native language knowledge when forming English sentences.

To avoid generalizations and obtain specific results, the study focuses on one of the more complex linguistic competencies – writing skills. It aims to identify English teachers' attitudes towards the use of a bilingual approach in teaching writing at university level. To further explore the potential of using the first language (Kazakh) in teaching writing in a target language (English), the study strives to understand the attitudes of university teachers towards the bilingual approach. To achieve this objective, the following research question guided this study: *Do English teachers at universities use the first language in their teaching of writing in English? If so, in what way?* This study thus attempts to present a general overview of the use of the first language (L1) in teaching English academic writing at universities in Kazakhstan.

Literature Review

Evolution of Use of L1 in Teaching Writing Skills in L2

It should be noted that in the early stages of studying the influence of L1 on L2 acquisition, the teaching of writing skills in L2 did not receive separate attention. One of the first works dedicated to the use of L1 in L2 instruction was published in 1969 (Boey, 1969). In this study, as well as in other research published in the 1970s and 1980s, the use of the first language in teaching writing in the second language was not addressed as a distinct pedagogical aspect (Cummins, 1979; Terrell, 1977).Instead, this issue was considered more broadly, alongside the development of all language skills. In the early 1980s, research began to foreground the role of the first language (L1) in the development of writing skills in a second language (L2). Reports on the outcomes of bilingual education programs also started to be published. For example, in 1982, TESOL released a report on the results of an experiment exploring the relationship between the development of writing skills in the first and the second languages (Edelsky, 1982). The report presented findings from a bilingual education program (Spanish as L1, English as L2). The study identified several factors that influence the development of writing skills in L2 when using L1 including: the nature of the writing systems of both languages; the learners' level of proficiency in L2; the literacy instruction strategies used in L2; and sociolinguistic constraints.

It should be noted that these factors were identified based on the analysis of experimental results within a bilingual program that placed special emphasis on writing. Current practice and recent scholarly research confirm the validity of the factors outlined in the report. In 1989, a report was published on a bilingual writing instruction program (a Spanish-English bilingual program) implemented in Puerto Rico. Writing skills of primary school students were assessed through a picture description task. Children who demonstrated strong writing and literacy skills in Spanish performed better than those with weaker native-language writing

abilities. In other words, low academic achievement in L1 was reflected in the level of writing proficiency in L2. By the late 1980s, research began to focus not only on the general influence of the first language (L1) on writing skills in the second language (L2), but also on more specific aspects.

Notably, one study (Arndt, 1987). examined the development of writing skills across proficiency levels, investigating how the level of academic writing in the first language (Chinese) affects the development of academic writing skills in English (L2). Later, the influence of L1 on the development of academic writing genre in L2 was explored in the work of E. (1997)E. (1997), who concluded that native speakers of Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Indonesian tend to use indirect evaluative strategies in academic English writing more frequently than native English speakers. These include rhetorical questions, repetition, types of evasive expressions, ambiguous pronouns, and the passive voice. Zhu et al. (2024)Zhu et al. (2024) attributes these tendencies to the influence of the first language on the formation of academic writing skills in English.

At the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, the use of L1 in developing writing skills in L2 began to be studied in greater detail. Researchers explored the preferred age of the target audience for using L1 in L2 writing instruction and identified the conditions of L2 proficiency necessary for employing L1 as a mediating language (Doiz & Lasagabaster, 2004; Wolfersberger, 2003). Studies also described phenomena such as language switching and code-switching in the context of teaching writing in L2 (Mekuria & Mohammed, 2025). The influence of L1 on L2 writing literacy began to be examined within specific writing styles (Hinkel, 2004). Scholarly attention was also directed toward the role of the first language in the instruction of specific essay genres in the second language, as evidenced by the works of (Hirose, 2003; Yoshimura, 2002).

In the past decade, studies on the use of L1 in developing writing skills in L2 have been characterized by a broader scope encompassing various aspects of instruction. While traditional topics continue to be explored (see above), new areas of inquiry have also emerged. These include self-editing of written texts using L1 (Eckstein & Ferris, 2018), collaborative writing strategies, and the challenges associated with L1 and L2 use in this context-particularly, how L1 use affects constructed texts (Zhang, 2018). Contemporary research also examines the application of L1 in the development of L2 writing skills within the framework of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) (Gallagher & Colohan, 2017; Lin, 2015). Thus, recent studies have focused on the use of L1 in teaching business writing in L2. For example, a study by Chinese scholars on the use of L1 to enhance integrated writing in L2 Zhu et al. (2024)Zhu et al. (2024)describes how the first language is employed in producing business-style texts in L2. A distinctive feature of recent studies on the use of L1 for the development of writing skills in the target language is the inclusion of methodologies involving digital tools and artificial intelligence (Moorhouse et al., 2024; Tabari et al., 2024).

Emerging research has thus addressed the challenges of preparing teachers for trans-languaging pedagogy, which places significant emphasis on the strategic use of L1 in developing L2 writing skills (Wong & Du, 2025). These studies have been devoted to the role of L1 in acquiring linguistic competencies in writing in the target language. However, the issue of developing a consistent and well-founded methodology on the use of the first language in fostering writing skills in the target language remains unresolved.

L1 to build students' English vocabulary

As is well established, the use of students' first or native language (L1) can be an effective tool for vocabulary development in English, particularly at the initial stages of foreign language learning. Studies addressing this issue generally fall into two major categories: theoretical justification outlining the advantages and disadvantages of employing L1 in English vocabulary acquisition, and practical recommendations for using L1 in the teaching of writing skills in the second language (L2). Within the first approach of theoretical justification, a number of scholars have examined the advantages and limitations of using the first language (L1) to support vocabulary development in the target language. (Hague, 1987) for instance, highlights the effectiveness of L1 in facilitating the comprehension of complex concepts, which in turn contributes to a more accurate understanding of entire texts in English. This view is also supported by Iswati L. and Hadimulyono A.O. (Chalmers, 2019; Iswati & Hadimulyono, 2018), too, argues that the positive function of L1 lies in its role as a basis for linguistic development and helps activate students' prior subject knowledge. Findings from empirical studies and qualitative analyses suggest that the appropriate use of L1 for semantic clarification during instruction can enhance the retention of new vocabulary in L2 (Liu, 2008).

The practical application of the first language (L1) in teaching vocabulary in the second language (L2) is explored in several studies (Alharbi, 2019; Campilio, 1995; Min, 2013). These studies examine the effectiveness of building synonym networks and propose strategies for L2 vocabulary retention through the use of L1 (Kim & Yoon, 2014). A number of works also emphasize the importance of level-specific instruction in vocabulary acquisition, taking into account learners' language proficiency. Level-based vocabulary teaching assumes a systematic approach to acquiring lexical items that correspond to a learner's specific proficiency stage. In this context, L1 can play a significant role. Empirical evidence suggests that L1 tends to be more effective at the early stages of English language learning (Soulignavong & Souvannasy, 2009). As learners' proficiency in L2 increases, teachers tend to rely less on L1. However, when dealing with abstract or complex concepts, the use of the first or native language remains beneficial even at advanced level of instruction. This

issue is addressed in the studies by (Hariri, 2015; Pakzadian, 2012). (Nation, 2017) and others.

A review of the literature reveals no studies that explicitly identify the use of the first language (L1) as an obstacle to second language (L2) vocabulary acquisition. However, a number of linguists advocate for an inclusive use of the target language (L2) in L2 instruction more broadly. For instance, renowned applied linguist Stephen Krashen, despite his advocacy for bilingual education in California (1998-2006), posits in his input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1981) that language acquisition should occur through exposure to the target language alone. He argus that reliance on L1 in the process of learning a second language may disrupt acquisition. Similar views are found in the works of other scholars (Littlewood & Yu, 2011; Scott & FUENTE, 2008; Turnbull & Arnett, 2002). The presence of such divergent perspectives underscores the need for continued systematic research on the role of L1 in L2 vocabulary teaching.

The psychological aspect of L1 use in teaching L2 writing skills

The analysis of existing research indicates that the use of the first language (L1) in the process of developing second language (L2) writing skills helps reduce cognitive load (Devine et al., 1993; Edelsky, 1982). Learners with low proficiency in the target language often feel more confident when allowed to use L1, as it serves as a source of support. In particular, Wahyudi (2023)Wahyudi (2023) notes that the use of native language translation during his lecture course not only enhanced students' comprehension of specific concepts, but also fostered a sense of freedom, decolonization, and self-affirmation. This suggests that incorporating L1 into L2 instruction creates an emotionally supportive environment that helps students overcome language barriers (Chalmers, 2019). Furthermore, the use of L1 in L2 teaching writing contributes to lowering the affective filter, thereby increasing learners' confidence in using the target language (Iswati & Hadimulyono, 2018).

It is well established that in the learning process, students use not only academic knowledge but also background knowledge and practical experience.(Adams, 2020) described an experiment in which English language teachers not only welcomed the use of the first language (L1) in the classroom but also created opportunities for students to draw upon multiple forms of knowledge, including academic knowledge, personal experience, worldview, and life skills within a multicultural classroom context. It is important to note that nearly all of these forms of knowledge were originally acquired in the students' L1. The outcome of this experiment was an improvement in students' self-identification as well as enhancement of both L1 and L2 proficiency.

When discussing the activation of cognitive functions through the use of the first language (L1) in the acquisition of second language (L2) writing skills, it is important to note the associated improvement in memory performance (Ransdell et al., 2002). Empirical data from the study by (Güvendir & Uzun, 2023) demonstrate that high levels of writing anxiety in L2 can negatively affect students' working memory, thereby diminishing the quality of their written output. In such cases, it is advisable to mitigate anxiety-inducing factors, and one effective approach is the strategic use of L1 when necessary. Thus, research indicates that the use of L1 in L2 teaching – particularly in writing – can help dismantle psychological barriers at the initial stages of learning, reduce classroom tension and anxiety, and enable students with limited proficiency in the target language to develop a sense of confidence.

Methodology

Research Design

The study used a mixed method research design to investigate the specifics of the first language (L1) use in English language teaching at university level. The quantitative method was used to examine data collected through an online questionnaire regarding the use of L1 by teachers in higher education while the qualitative approach enabled the identification of the benefits and challenges associated with employing L1 in teaching of English academic writing.

Ampling and data collection

The university English teachers were selected and asked five closed-ended questions about the implementation of L1 in teaching English. The sample was selected through purposive sampling technique as the main object of the online survey was to collect and analyze the opinions of instructors who experienced bilingual method in teaching. The online survey was conducted using Google form, with the aim to comprehend deeply the experience of teachers, and advantages and challenges of implementing L1 in EFL lessons. The survey included a set of quantitative tools, consisting of closed-ended questions, which provided a numerical representation of the frequency of using the bilingual method in teaching English in Kazakhstan, particularly in teaching writing. It also addressed the occurrence of difficulties in realization of the bilingual method in English language teaching at the university level. The online questionnaire was chosen as it allows respondents to complete the survey at their convenience, thereby saving time and resources.

The quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistical methods, systematized, and presented in the form of tables and charts that visually illustrate the practice of using the bilingual method in English language teaching. In developing the survey questions, international experience in applying this method to teaching writing was taken into account (Brisk & Harrington, 2010). All participants gave their consent to take part in the data collection. The online survey was designed to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of responses. Ethical standards consistent with international norms for educational research were strictly observed throughout the survey process.

Results and Discussion

The study examined the use of the Kazakh language (L1) in teaching writing skills in English (L2). The participants were the English language teachers at the university level who were asked to respond to a series of questions, the analysis of which led to several key findings. The findings revealed that in the pre-writing stage, 90% of English language instructors make frequent use of the first language (Fig.1).
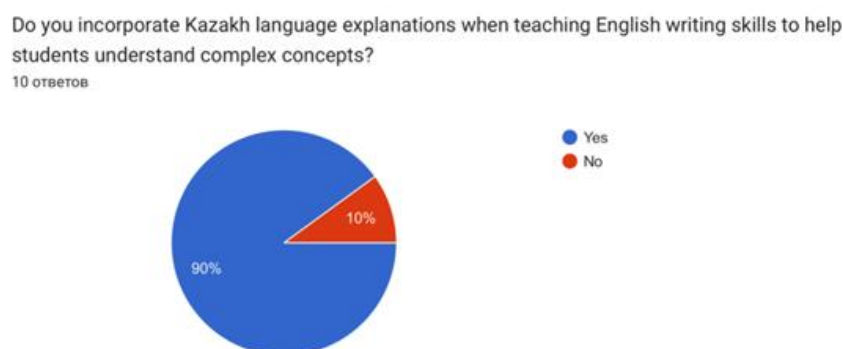

Figure 1: *Using L1 in teaching writing*

The use of Kazakh (L1) in this context was motivated by several factors, including improved student comprehension of complex concepts, faster acquisition of material, and the reduction of psychological stress during the learning process. Given the significant structural differences between Kazakh and English, students' first language serves as a useful tool for grasping the meaning and nuances of concepts when translated into Kazakh, particularly in the initial stages of English language learning. These findings are consistent with global practices in foreign language education, where learners' native or first language is used as a supportive resource. For instance, (Zakaria, 2013), in describing the specifics of English language learning among Indonesian students, notes that the use of the first language helps teachers ensure students' full understanding of lexical meanings and grammatical structures. Based on the results of the experiment, S (Stapa & Majid, 2012).recommends that English language teachers use the first language during the pre-writing stage (for idea generation and concept discussion), as it has a positive impact on essay writing outcomes, particularly for students with low levels of language proficiency.

Another key finding of the study was the analysis of L1 use during vocabulary activities for English writing tasks in the L2. The research revealed that translation into Kazakh (L1) and the selection of equivalents in this language are employed as tools to enrich students' vocabulary when teaching writing in L2. Figure 2 demonstrates that 80% of English language instructors among the respondents rely on the first language during preparation of vocabulary for writing tasks in English (see Figure 2).
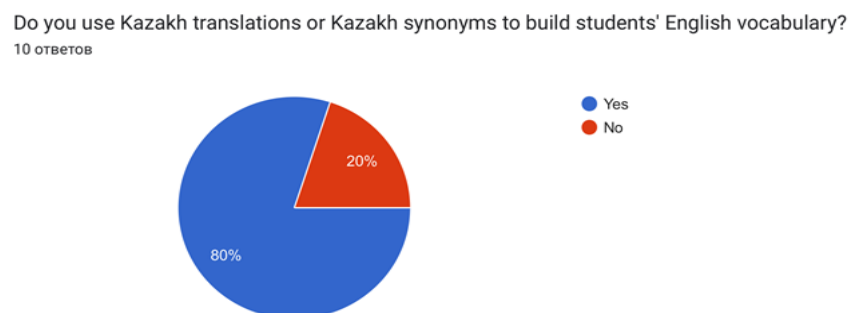

Figure 2: *L2 in teaching vocabulary*

Local teaching practices indicate that using the L1 during the work on vocabulary for English writing task offers several advantages. One of them is that it allows students to associate a new word with its equivalent in L1, which facilitates the connection between new information and existing knowledge.

Additionally, in some cases – particularly when dealing with complex concepts – translating into L1 can accelerate the memorization of new English words. Synonyms in Kazakh may help students grasp the meaning of new target language vocabulary more quickly, especially when the concept is abstract. It has been observed that comparing synonyms in Kazakh and English can aid learners in understanding subtle semantic nuances more effectively.

Joyce (2018)Joyce (2018) investigated the impact of using L1 translations in teaching L2 vocabulary. The study found that students who were provided with translations of words into their first language during lessons demonstrated higher vocabulary acquisition outcomes compared to those who memorized words based on their English definitions. (Pakzadian, 2012) reported on the outcomes of using paraphrasing and translations of English words into learners' L1. The results of the assessments showed that employing L1 paraphrasing or word translation facilitated more effective acquisition of English vocabulary. In our study, 80% of English language instructors reported using this bilingual instructional technique to enhance students' vocabulary development, which supports the effectiveness of this approach.

However, the use of Kazakh synonyms and L1 translations should be complemented by other instructional methods. The meanings of English words can vary depending on the context, and Kazakh synonyms do not always help interpret the correct meaning in a given situation. Likewise, L1 translations may not fully convey the nuances of meaning in English. Nevertheless, when these limitations are taken into account, students' first language can be effectively utilized to help acquire the vocabulary necessary for academic writing.

As a result of this study, the attitudes of English language teachers toward the use of L1 resources were also identified. In university-level English teaching, many teachers reported about the use of the Kazakh-language resources (such as dictionaries, reference books, and grammar guides) (see Figure 3).

Do you provide Kazakh-language resources (e.g., glossaries or grammar guides) to support English vocabulary development?
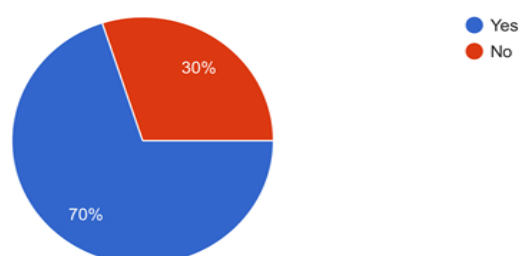10 ответов

- Yes
- No

30%

70%

Figure 3: *L1 resources*

According to the opinions of participants, the use of Kazakh-language (L1) resources when learning English (L2) vocabulary can significantly facilitate the learning process. Bilingual dictionaries and translators help save time when searching for necessary information. They are especially useful for novice English learners who find it difficult to grasp L2 definitions. However, it should be noted that the English translation of a word may differ from its Kazakh equivalent. In some cases, bilingual dictionaries do not provide sufficient context for understanding the meaning of a word. Therefore, when using such L1-based resources, it is essential to verify the accuracy of the translation. To better understand the grammatical structure of certain new English words, particularly among beginner-level students, grammar guides written in Kazakh are often preferred. This allows students to compare the grammatical structures of English and Kazakh words, thereby facilitating a better understanding of how to use word forms appropriately in context.

Unfortunately, there are very few digital platforms in Kazakhstan that support the learning of English vocabulary through the Kazakh language (e.g., Qlang, Digital College, Abay Academy). Such platforms allow using Kazakh as a mediating language in the process of learning English. However, the auxiliary functions of these platforms are not sufficiently adapted for the effective use of L1 (Kazakh) in learning L2 (English). It should be noted that the use of online platforms with a Kazakh interface for expanding English vocabulary was not among the primary objectives of this study. This question is addressed only within the broader context of utilizing L1-based resources to support vocabulary development in English.

Chalmers (2019), in his study, analyzes various perspectives on the use of L1 resources in English language teaching. In particular, he notes that employing the L1 as a mediating language in vocabulary teaching in the target language has both advantages. The use of L1 in learning new English words proves effective for learners with a beginner level of English proficiency. However, the consistent reliance on L1 may lead students to develop a habit of depending on their native language during foreign language learning, which can later become a significant obstacle to the practical use of the target language. According to Kim M. and colleagues (Kim et al., 2022), the expansion of English vocabulary is influenced by the level of learners'

acquisition of words in their native language. From their perspective, word-learning skills in L1 affect the process of learning new words in L2.

The next finding of the study is related to the psychological effect of using the Kazakh language (L1) in teaching English writing skills (Figure 4).

Do you think integrating the Kazakh language into English writing lessons boosts students' confidence in expressing themselves?
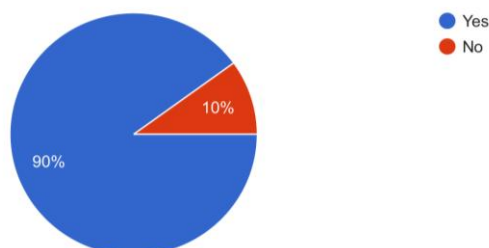
10 ответов

● Yes
● No

Figure 4: *Psychological effect of using the L1*

As shown in the diagram, 90% of the respondents believe that the use of the L1 boosts students' confidence during the learning process and creates a comfortable classroom atmosphere. Among the positive aspects noted were the reduction of the language barrier and the creation of a supportive learning environment. The use of Kazakh, especially at the initial stage of learning English, can make the process less stressful. Translation of the words that represent abstract and complex concepts into the first language helps students reduce the anxiety associated with learning a foreign language. Carson and Kashihara, (2012) analyzed the outcomes of using L1 (Japanese) in the process of learning English by Japanese students. Following (Meyer & Foster, 2008), they view the L1 as a tool that reduces students' emotional tension when learning L2.

As is well known, a living language is not merely a bare model composed of grammatical structures. Every language carries the culture of its speakers; therefore, when students use their native language, they also bring their native culture into the learning process. This cultural element helps them adapt more easily to learning a foreign language, particularly at the initial stages. This specific feature of using the L1 in teaching writing skills in L2 was described by Adams B.L. (Adams, 2020) in his case study. The results of his research demonstrated that the use of L1 in the process of learning English allows students to enhance their self-identity by developing proficiency in both their native and foreign languages.

Conclusion

This study presented a conceptual perspective of English language instructors on the use of Kazakh (L1) in teaching academic writing skills in English (L2) within a university classroom context. Identifying the extent to which English teachers employ L1 in their teaching practices was driven by the need to form a general framework for the subsequent in-depth investigation of this issue in Kazakhstan. Among all linguistic skills, writing was specifically chosen for analysis, as it is widely recognized as one of the most challenging aspects of foreign language learning.

The issue of using a bilingual approach to language teaching in Kazakhstan is highly relevant, as Kazakhstani society is multilingual. In the educational system, the bilingual approach is frequently applied – student groups are often formed based on the language of instruction (Kazakh or Russian), and in some cases, multilingual groups are created. In our study, the focus was placed on the analysis of responses of English language teachers working with groups in which Kazakh was the primary language of instruction. In other words, English was taught with the use of L1 – Kazakh - as a supporting language.

The analysis of the collected data from English language teachers indicates the effectiveness of the bilingual approach in teaching English writing skills at the initial stage of language learning. The study revealed that 90% of the participants use L1 (Kazakh) when teaching writing in English. The use of Kazakh (L1) supports students in memorizing new vocabulary needed for constructing written texts – they translate words and word combinations into Kazakh, select equivalent words, and form synonymous constructions. Kazakh-language resources such as bilingual dictionaries and reference materials play a significant role in this process. An important finding reported by the English instructors relates to the students' psycho-emotional state: when L1 is used in the classroom, students feel more confident, as they are not constrained by the language barrier and hale the opportunity to express their thoughts in Kazakh. This serves a crucial factor in overcoming the fear of learning a foreign language.

However, the use of L1 must be approached with certain limitations. In most cases, the use of L1 in teaching English proves effective primarily at the early stages of foreign language learning, when students

lack sufficient vocabulary and have little to no practice in using the L2. The application of L1 should be accompanied by the translation of instructions, vocabulary units, and other elements into the target language. This approach enables students to gradually expand their use of English and increase their exposure to L2. As a future research perspective aimed at more effectively implementing bilingual instruction in foreign language writing within Kazakhstan's multilingual society, it is planned to conduct a deeper investigation into current practices and analyze the outcomes of teaching English writing skills in both monolingual and multilingual groups. To obtain more reliable results, a level-based study is planned to examine the specific features of L1 use in teaching writing in L2, depending on students' proficiency in English.

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