

FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND VIETNAMESE

**NON-ENGLISH MAJORED STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS
ON THE USE OF VIETNAMESE IN EFL CLASSROOMS****NGUYEN DUC DAO* - NGO THI HUYEN****

ABSTRACT: This paper aimed at investigating the perceptions of non-English majored students on the use of the first language (L1-tiếng Việt) in English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms in the blended learning (BL) environment at a university in Vietnam. The findings suggest that the use of L1 in face-to-face EFL classrooms in the BL approach can be beneficial in facilitating communication, promoting learning, and enhancing students' motivation... However, the results also indicate that the frequency and extent of the use of L1 depend on various factors, including students' English proficiency, teachers' beliefs about the role of L1 in EFL classrooms. The results of the study partly contribute to the ongoing debate on the use of L1 in EFL classrooms in general and in face-to-face EFL classrooms in the BL approach in particular.

KEY WORDS: perceptions; blended learning; L1; EFL; classroom; approach.

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1. Introduction

Today, English is considered an international language and used in international contexts in all the fields. Because of its necessity, people try to find the best way to teach and learn English. Therefore, different methods and techniques in teaching this language were found. One issue that has raised lots of debates for educators both in the world and in Vietnam is about the use of L1 when teaching and learning English.

Since Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has become popular, it would appear that the use of solely English in EFL classrooms is widely agreed. Monolingual supporters suggest that the target language should be used all the time in EFL classrooms. However, others encourage teachers to share their L1 with their students and use it to enhance the second language (L2) teaching and learning process. This led to another approach in language education, the bilingual approach. The supporters pointed out some potential benefits of using L1 in EFL classrooms: adopting L1 in EFL classes provides students with a sense of security and reduces their stress (Butzkamm (2003); as a helpful teaching technique for explaining grammar concepts, confirming comprehension, and providing directions (Bruen & Kelly, 2017);...

In Vietnam, some studies on the use of L1 in EFL classrooms in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) have been conducted. Most of the findings show that the use of Vietnamese in English classrooms seems to be more preferred in both teaching and learning the foreign language. According to Ngo and Phuong (2018), the use of L1 helps students learn and understand English since it helps teachers in a variety of situations, including explaining grammar rules or vocabulary words, delivering instructions, managing the classroom, developing a connection with students, and more. However, there has not been any research on the use of L1 in face-to-face classrooms in the BL program.

As teachers of English for non-English majored students at a university in Hanoi, when talking to some teachers of English and students, the researchers realize that they have different perspectives of using L1 in EFL classrooms in the BL environment. However, how are non-English majored students' perceptions towards the usage of L1 different? And how should L1 be used in EFL classrooms in the BL program at the university to help students reach the objectives of the lessons? These questions are perceived as an important one that needs investigating and solving to improve teaching and learning English for the teachers and the non-English majored students at the

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university. Accordingly, in order to address the above questions, this study was carried out and with the hope of exploring non-English majored students' opinions toward using L1 in face to face classrooms in the BL approaches at the university and finding out the suitable solutions to the usage of L1 in EFL classrooms to help both teachers and students realize the roles of L1 as well as how to use it in teaching and learning English.

2. Literature review

2.1. The usage of L1 in EFL teaching

Throughout the history of EFL teaching, numerous teaching methods have been used to support teaching and learning processes. The first method is the Grammar Translation Method (GTM). According to Richards and Rodgers (1986), some of the main characteristics of GTM is that teaching language by analyzing grammar rules, translating sentences and texts into and out of the target language and presenting vocabulary by bilingual word lists.

In the late nineteenth century, there was a big change in learning languages with the aim of communicating. This results in The Direct Method (DM) which is totally opposed to GTM. Based on the idea that FL learning should imitate L1 learning, it forbids the use of L1 in conversations between students and their teachers. Even though DM saw a decline after reaching its peak in the early twentieth centuries, it created the foundation for many other approaches, such as the Audio-lingual Method and Communicative Approach.

The Audio-lingual Method was created to help Americans study the languages of both their allies and their opponents during World War II. Its goal is to enable students to "employ the target language communicatively" (Larsen- Freeman, 1986). The Audio-Lingual Method, like the Direct Method, emphasizes spoken language and prohibits translation and the use of students' mother tongues (MT) in the classroom (Ellis, 2003). In contrast, the Communicative Approach, which dominated modern language education over the past 50 years, allowed limited use of the mother tongue of students where it is practical and permits the use of translation where students find it necessary and beneficial (Ellis, 2003).

The monolingual and bilingual approaches are the two main competing theories about the impact of first-language (L1) use in the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language. A bilingual approach has historically served as the foundation for teaching and learning a second language, particularly through the use of the grammar-translation method. This altered when trends developed, resulting in monolingual methods and the implementation of innovative methodologies that prioritized the exclusive use of the L2 in the classroom (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Some linguists suggest that the use of students' mother tongues in English instruction should be forbidden, while others argue that doing so benefits language acquisition.

2.2. Advantages of the use of L1 in EFL classrooms

There are various benefits of using the L1 described by researchers. Polio and Duff (1994) acknowledge that the use of L1 can generate empathy and develop a relationship, as well as to make classroom environments comfortable and interesting. They also pointed out some suitable cases where L1 can be used: classroom administrative vocabulary, classroom management, grammar teaching, empathy/solidarity, English practice, unfamiliar vocabulary/translation, comprehension issues, and an interactive impact. Classroom administrative vocabulary was discovered to be the most commonly used because of the two possible explanations. To begin with, it helps students convey the information in preparation for an upcoming exam. Secondly, an equivalent word may not be found in the target language; thus, L1 needs to be utilized.

According to Cook (2001), L1 is used by teachers to transmit and check words and sentences' meaning, to clarify grammar, to manage the classroom, to maintain discipline, to engage individual pupils, and to assess the learners. Moreover, Swain and Lapkin (2000) state that L1 is utilized in the classrooms for three reasons: to deliver a task and manage it, concentrate on vocabulary and grammatical concepts, and improve the interpersonal contact between the learners while they are working on a task. Nation (2003) using L1 can be based on types of task. Employing L1 is critical in

vocabulary acquisition activities, and effective when using word cards with their L1 translation. He also claims that L1 might be useful for meaning-focused tasks.

2.3. Disadvantages the use of L1 in EFL classrooms

On the other hand, there are some disadvantages of L1 usage in EFL classrooms which was mentioned in previous studies. One disadvantage of using L1 in the EFL classroom is that students may become too reliant on it, hindering their ability to learn English. For example, students may become accustomed to using L1 to communicate with their peers and the teacher, leading to a lack of English language practice (Sahragard & Mukundan, 2019). According to Duan & Wang (2020), using L1 in the EFL classrooms may interfere with students' acquisition of English. L1 may be used inappropriately, leading to errors in English production.

Another drawback of L1 usage is that using L1 without any purposes results in restricted L2 exposure. When taking into account the target language acquisition contexts where L2 exposure may not always be maintained, it declines the chance to improve speaking in the target language (Elridge, 1996). In contrast to what is thought to happen to students' motivation when L1 is disregarded, maximizing L2 can increase students' motivation. As a result, learners are put in a position where they must ensure that they can effectively communicate the message using their speaking abilities. This directly increases pupils' sense of accomplishment in the target language (Carless, 2007).

3. The study

- *Setting and participants:* The study was conducted at a university in Hanoi where English is a compulsory subject for non-English major students. This university has implemented a blended-learning approach for occupational purposes in teaching English. The programs cover four skills in English in which vocabulary, grammar, listening, writing and reading skills are learned online at home via the online learning management system named "EOP" (English for Occupational Purposes) under the teachers' observation. In face-to-face classrooms, speaking skill is mostly focused on with their teachers' instruction. The study was undertaken with the participants of 170 non-English majored sophomores who were randomly selected from 5 classes at this university. The student's English proficiency levels are mixed in each class, but most of them are at low and medium English proficiency levels.

- *Instruments:* This survey was carried out by using questionnaire and semi-structured interview. The questionnaire was adapted from Gaebler's study (2014) with 7 multiple-choice questions, aiming to find out the students' perceptions toward the use of Vietnamese in EFL classrooms. The interview with some open questions in order to get in depth information about the students' opinions of using Vietnamese in their EFL classrooms, getting a full picture of data and making the data more reliable.

- *Data analysis:* The collected data was examined both qualitatively and quantitatively. The numeric data was examined using the computer software SPSS 20.0, while the qualitative data was assessed by describing it. The results were measured in the percentage, and then they were illustrated and systematized by figures and tables.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Students' perceptions of L1 use in face-to-face classrooms in the blended learning approach

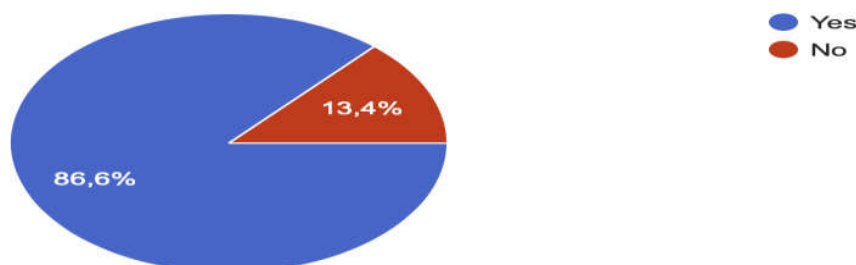


Figure 1. Students' perceptions of The use of L1 in face-to-face classrooms

As can be seen in figure 1, the students showed different opinions on the use of the first language. Most of the students (86.6%) advocated that Vietnamese should be used in EFL classrooms in the BL approach. The findings from the students' interviews presented the same opinions from interviewees. When being asked "Do you think Vietnamese should be used in face-to-face classrooms?", all of the students said "yes". It indicates that they think Vietnamese is necessary for English learning in the face-to-face classrooms in the BL approach where the students learn only speaking skills and learn other skills on the Online Learning Management System. Whereas, only a few students (13.4%) answered with "no", indicating that they do not believe Vietnamese should be used in the face-to-face English classrooms. This may suggest that some participants feel that the use of Vietnamese in the classrooms hinders the learning process or that English should be taught in an immersive environment with as little use of Vietnamese as possible. Overall, the majority of participants in this study support the use of Vietnamese in face-to-face EFL classrooms.

4.2. Students' opinions on the frequency of Vietnamese use of the teachers in face-to-face classrooms in the blended learning approach

The students' opinions on the frequency of the use of L1 by the teachers in face-to-face classrooms was expressed in the table below.

Table 1. Students' opinion on the frequency of L1 use of the teachers in face-to-face classrooms

Frequency (Approximate percentage)	Number of responses	Percentage (%)
Never (0% of the time)	0	0
Occasionally (10-20% of the time)	28	17.1
Sometimes (20-40% of the time)	84	51.2
Frequently (50-80% of the time)	52	31.7
Always (90-100% of the time)	0	0
	164	100%

Table 1 shows that more than half of the students (51.2%) believed Vietnamese should be sometimes used in the classroom by their teacher. This result is similar to the one from the interviews. Some students agreed that "The teacher should use Vietnamese in some cases, but it should account for 20 to 30% of the lecture", and Vietnamese should be used when necessary only.

This suggests that the participants believe that the use of Vietnamese can help facilitate English language learning, but should not be the dominant language in the classroom. 31.7% of participants selected "*frequently*," indicating that they believe their teachers should use Vietnamese more than 50% of the time in the classroom. The minority felt that occasional use would be acceptable (17.1%). This suggests that some participants may prefer an immersive English-only environment and may feel that the use of Vietnamese hinders their language learning. None of them wants their teacher to always or never use Vietnamese. In general, it can be seen that even though all of the students think Vietnamese should be used by their teachers in their face-to-face classrooms, it should not occur too frequently.

4.3. Students' opinions on the purposes for the teachers' use of Vietnamese in face-to-face classrooms in the blended learning approach

The results from the questionnaire show that the students value the use of Vietnamese in face-to-face classrooms, with a total of 719 responses recorded across the eight purposes as illustration.

Table 2. *Students' opinions on the purposes for the teachers' use of Vietnamese in face-to-face classrooms in the blended learning approach*

No	Purposes	Responses	
		N	Percent of cases
1	Defining new vocabulary	112	68.2%
2	Explaining complex grammar points	116	70.7%
3	Managing the classroom	62	37.8%
4	Developing a relationship with students	108	65.9%
5	Translating	45	27.4%
6	Checking comprehension	88	53.7%
7	Provide feedback	96	58.5%
8	Giving instructions	92	56.1%
	Total	719	438.3%

In Table 2, the most popular purpose for using Vietnamese is explaining complex grammar points, with 116 responses, taking up 70.7% of the total responses, closely followed by defining new vocabulary with 112 responses, accounting for 68.2%. This suggests that students find it helpful when teachers use Vietnamese to clarify language concepts. In the interviews, most of the interviewees also suggested that the teachers should use Vietnamese when explaining new vocabulary and grammar structures. Before conducting speaking activities in the classrooms, the students have to learn vocabulary and grammar at home on EOP, but sometimes they still find it difficult to understand all of the words and grammar points, especially for students at a low level. As a result, they think their teachers need to use Vietnamese to clarify them in the classrooms. The third most popular purpose for using Vietnamese is developing a relationship with students, with 65.9% of the responses. This indicates that the students think the use of Vietnamese can build rapport with their teachers, and perhaps create a comfortable classroom environment. Other purposes for using Vietnamese are less commonly mentioned, with managing the classroom (37.8%), translating

(27.4%), and giving instructions (56.1%). This suggests that a small number of the students see that the teachers can take advantages of Vietnamese to control the classroom's disciplines or translate when necessary. Vietnamese use can also ensure they fully understand instructions for speaking activities, which can be critical for the success of classroom activities.

Similarly, when interviewed, the students stated the teachers should use Vietnamese to explain instructions. In addition, more than half of the students agreed that Vietnamese is necessary for the teachers to check students' comprehension (53.7%), comment on the student's performance, and correct errors after each activity in the classrooms to make sure the students realize their strengths and weaknesses (58.5%). This opinion was pointed out in the student #2 interview that *"I think, teachers should use Vietnamese in class to comment on our talks. After we finish our presentations, if ..."*.

In conclusion, the data suggests that the students who are at low and medium English proficiency levels generally support the use of Vietnamese in face-to-face classrooms for a variety of purposes, particularly for explaining complex grammar points and defining new vocabulary. In addition, the use of Vietnamese can support teachers in conducting speaking activities by explaining instructions, checking students' understanding and giving feedback in Vietnamese.

4.4. Students' opinions on the frequency of their own Vietnamese use in face-to-face classrooms

The students' views on the frequency which the students should use Vietnamese in face-to-face classrooms in the BL approach were illustrated as follow.



Figure 2. Students' opinion on the frequency of of their own Vietnamese use in face-to-face classrooms

It can be seen from figure 2 that the students favored Vietnamese use by their classmates because the majority of them supported frequent use (51.2%) and 31.7% agreed with the "sometimes" use. In the interviews, most of the students think, *"English should be the main language used in face-to-face classrooms, but the students can use Vietnamese sometimes when they cannot present something in English"*. Surprisingly, 12.2% of the responses advocated that their friends could "always" use Vietnamese in the classrooms. In contrast, very few participants preferred "never" or "occasionally" use (1.3% and 3.7% respectively). One of the interviewees stated that the frequency may depend on the students' levels. She said, *"With the students at higher levels of English proficiency, they can use Vietnamese most of the time in the classroom. However, with less proficient students, they need to use Vietnamese more frequently."* Overall, the data suggests that the use of Vietnamese is quite common among students in the classroom. Most of them want to use Vietnamese sometimes (20-40% of the time) or even frequently (50-80% of the time). The differences of the usage may depend on their levels.

4.5. Students' opinions on the purposes for their classmates to use Vietnamese in face-to-face classrooms in the blended learning approach

The students' opinions on the purposes for their classmates to use Vietnamese in face-to-face classrooms in the blended learning approach was expressed as in the following table:

Table 3. *Students' opinions on the purposes for their classmates to use Vietnamese in face-to-face classrooms in the blended learning approach*

No	Purposes for the classmates are to use Vietnamese	Responses	
		N	Percent of cases
1	Clarifying their difficult ideas	98	59.7%
2	Doing group work	104	63.4%
3	Asking and answering questions	72	43.9%
	Total	274	167%

As can be seen from table 3, out of the 274 total responses received, 59.7% of the respondents felt that the main purpose for their classmates to use Vietnamese was to clarify difficult ideas. For non-majors, especially who has limited English proficiency, it can be challenging to use English to express all their ideas; therefore, it is helpful to use Vietnamese to present some complex ones. The interviewee clarified this point that *"I am not good at English, I cannot speak it fluently, so I use Vietnamese most of the time to speak to my friends and to answer my teacher's question...."*. The second most popular response was doing group work, with 104 (63.4%) respondents stating that they believed this was an important purpose for their classmates to use Vietnamese. Student #3 also pointed out this point; *"Groupwork requires a lot interactions and discussions. However, we sometimes cannot speak English well enough for my classmates to understand,..."*. This indicates that the students feel that they can work more effectively in groups if they can communicate in Vietnamese. The third purpose listed in the survey was asking and answering questions, with 72 (43.9%) respondents. This suggests that students think that they can better participate in class discussions if they can express themselves in their native language.

On the whole, the data suggests that classmates use Vietnamese for some different purposes in the classroom, mainly for communicating with their peers in group work activities, clarifying difficult ideas that they can not express in English. The data also indicates that some students may utilize Vietnamese when they want to ask and answer the teachers' questions.

4.6. Students' opinions on the benefits of the use of Vietnamese in face-to-face classrooms

The students' perceptions on the benefits of Vietnamese use in face-to-face classrooms were showed in the table below.

Table 4. *Students' perceptions on the benefits of the use of Vietnamese in face-to-face classrooms*

No	Benefits of Vietnamese use	Number of responses	Percent of cases
1	Helps students understand difficult concepts	116	70.7%
2	Helps students understand new vocabulary and grammar	104	63.4%
3	Makes students feel comfortable and less stressed	114	69.5%
4	Saves time	98	59.8%
5	Encourages students to participate in class activities	107	65.2%
6	Enhances my students' motivation and interest	84	51.2%

7	Other. Please specify _____	0	0%
	Total	623	379.8%

The table shows that the findings suggested the use of Vietnamese in face-to-face classrooms can be helpful in several ways. It seems that the majority of the students (70.7%) believe that using Vietnamese in face-to-face classrooms helps them to understand difficult concepts. Additionally, a significant percentage of students (63.4%) believe that using Vietnamese helps themselves understand new vocabulary and grammar. Regarding the role of Vietnamese use, the interviewed student #2 expressed that *“Vietnamese is necessary to use in an English class because it is a bridge between the teacher and the students..., and because we learn English for occupational purposes, there are new terms and specialized knowledge that are difficult to understand if the teacher uses English only.”*. The use of Vietnamese in the classroom also has a positive impact on students' emotional aspect, with 69.5% of the respondents stating that using Vietnamese makes themselves feel comfortable and less stressed. Furthermore, many students (65.2%) believe that using Vietnamese encourages them to participate in class activities, which can have a positive impact on their engagement and overall learning outcomes. Student #3 said *“..., it is necessary to understand the lessons thoroughly, so using Vietnamese can sometimes make us feel comfortable and confident to participate in class activities”*.

While saving time is not the most popular reason for using Vietnamese, it still appears to be a benefit for some students, with 59.8% of respondents indicating that Vietnamese use can save time. Because in face-to-face classrooms, the teachers do not spend time on vocabulary and grammar teaching, they may use Vietnamese to explain difficult concepts quickly instead of trying to explain in English. Finally, over half of the students surveyed (51.2%) believe that using Vietnamese enhances their motivation and interest in the class. To conclude, all the findings pointed out that the benefits of Vietnamese use are improving the students' comprehension, saving time and making them feel more comfortable, motivated and interested in the lessons.

4.7. Students' perceptions on the drawbacks of the use of Vietnamese in face-to-face classrooms

The students' perceptions on the disadvantages of the use of Vietnamese for the students' English learning progress were expressed in the following table.

Table 5. *Students' perceptions on the drawbacks of the use of Vietnamese in face-to-face classrooms*

No	The drawbacks of L1 use	A number of responses	Percent of cases
1	Prevents me from thinking in English	102	62.2%
2	Limits my exposure to English	125	76.2%
3	Reinforce errors in grammar or pronunciation	84	51.2%
4	Limits the development of speaking ability	118	71.9%
5	Other, please specify _____	0	0
	Total	429	201.5%

Table 5 shows that most of the participants agreed that Vietnamese usage limits exposure to English, with 76.2% of the respondents. This suggests that participants believe that Vietnamese in the

classroom limits the exposure to the target language which can make their learning progress more successful. Student #3 favored this point as she said, *"I think that both the teachers and students should keep using Vietnamese to a minimum"*. It also can be seen that a large percentage of students (71.9%) felt that using Vietnamese in classrooms could limit the development of their speaking ability. This could be because Vietnamese use may prevent the students from pushing themselves to practice speaking English in the face to face classrooms in the BL approach. According to student #5, the teacher should restrict the quantity of Vietnamese utilized in English classrooms because doing so regularly hindered students from communicating in English *"If we are allowed to use Vietnamese in the classroom, we may not feel the need to communicate in English..."*.

Another significant concern was that the use of Vietnamese prevents students from thinking in English, with 62.2% of respondents choosing. They think that the students who rely too heavily on Vietnamese may feel lazy to think in English, and they prefer to think in Vietnamese because it is easier for them." Student #2 found using Vietnamese too much can make the students depend on it *"If the teacher excessively relies on Vietnamese, it can create a dependency on it among the learners. They may become ..."*. Half of the students (51.2%) also expressed concern that Vietnamese use could reinforce errors in grammar or pronunciation. This could be because students may use the grammar rules of their native language unconsciously when translating from Vietnamese to English, or they can be affected by Vietnamese pronunciation when speaking, which leads to mistakes in their language use. Student #4 mentioned this drawback in her interview, *"I can see a lot of students make grammatical mistakes when speaking English. This is because they were influenced by their native language when they learn in a bilingual environment."*

In conclusion, the students all see that there are some drawbacks when using Vietnamese in their classrooms in terms of the limited exposure to English, making errors and dependency on Vietnamese. In addition, it is harmful to the students' development of speaking ability.

5. Conclusion

This study was an attempt to investigate students' perceptions towards the use of Vietnamese in EFL classrooms in the blended-learning environment at a university in Vietnam. Besides, it also indicates how to use Vietnamese effectively to support teaching and learning. The data indicated that though the use of Vietnamese has both advantages and disadvantages, the majority of students supported the use of Vietnamese as a tool to aid in English learning but did not want it to be the dominant language in the face-to-face classrooms in the BL environment. They desired their teachers to use Vietnamese as a way to help them better understand new words and grammar as well as explain complex concepts or ideas before they practise speaking skills in the face-to-face classrooms. Moreover, it cannot be denied that the use of Vietnamese can help students in comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and emotions, but it can also limit their exposure to English and prevent them from thinking in English, thus making them lazy in speaking English. Therefore, the amount of Vietnamese use should be limited to take advantages of it and avoid the disadvantages of the overuse. Teachers and students need to adjust the frequency and situations and adopt a flexible approach to language instruction and use Vietnamese strategically to support foreign language teaching and learning in general and in the blended-learning environment in particular.

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Phản hồi của sinh viên không chuyên tiếng Anh về việc sử dụng tiếng Việt trong lớp học tiếng Anh

Tóm tắt: Bài viết này nhằm mục đích khảo sát phản hồi của sinh viên không chuyên tiếng Anh về việc sử dụng ngôn ngữ thứ nhất (tiếng Việt) trong lớp học tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ trong môi trường học kết hợp tại một trường đại học ở Việt Nam. Các kết quả cho thấy, việc sử dụng tiếng Việt trong các lớp học trực tiếp theo phương thức học tập kết hợp đã mang lại những lợi ích nhất định trong việc tạo điều kiện cho việc giao tiếp, thúc đẩy học tập và nâng cao động lực học tập cho sinh viên... Tuy nhiên, kết quả cũng chỉ ra rằng tần suất và mức độ sử dụng tiếng Việt phụ thuộc vào nhiều yếu tố khác nhau, bao gồm trình độ tiếng Anh của sinh viên, niềm tin của giảng viên về vai trò của tiếng Việt trong lớp học tiếng Anh. Kết quả của nghiên cứu góp phần làm rõ hơn những tranh luận hiện nay về việc sử dụng tiếng Việt trong các lớp học ngoại ngữ nói chung và trong lớp học tiếng Anh trực tiếp áp dụng phương thức học tập kết hợp nói riêng.

Từ khóa: nhận thức; học kết hợp; ngôn ngữ thứ nhất; tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ; lớp học; phương thức.