

NEST Use of L1 in the EFL Classroom

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Introduction

The perceived acceptability of the learners' mother tongue (L1) in the classroom has changed as language teaching methodology has evolved. When the grammar-translation method was largely employed, L1 use was not just an inevitability, it was a natural part of pedagogy. As the audiolingual approach supplanted grammar-translation in many classrooms, the use of L1 virtually disappeared. In many schools and institutions, its use was even forbidden. To this day, despite many advances in L2 teaching methodologies, policies against L1 use persist (Ford, 2009).

But is classroom L1 use a detriment, as many schools purport? Research indicates otherwise. Many reasons have been given for limiting classroom language to the target language (L2). Ellis (in Duff & Polio, 1990) argues that students need vast quantities of target language input, and that resorting to the L1 deprives students of a valuable learning opportunity. Others claim the L1 becomes a crutch for students. Some say L1 use results in the fossilization of students' interlanguage. Finally, some say that L1 inhibits students from thinking in the target language. However, few of these reasons are actually backed by research, and even those that are, do not necessarily justify the implementation of L2-only policies.

As someone who has learned the Japanese language well enough to express myself in the language, I wanted to properly ascertain whether or not this specific skill has positive implications in my classroom. As someone who has developed language proficiency in Japanese as an adult, who has passed the highest level of proficiency testing for L2 learners of Japanese (JLPT = Japanese Language Proficiency Test N1), this topic fascinates me and affects my approach in the L2 English classroom. This research project seeks to examine the appropriateness of L1 use in the classroom. It will focus primarily on the students' affective filters and motivation, as well as their personal views on L1 use by the teacher,

particularly when their teacher is not a native L1 speaker.

Literature Review

Recent research leans towards accepting judicious use of L1 in the classroom. Meyer (2008) suggests that L1 can be useful to promote and preserve students' cultural identity, for classroom management issues, to perform comprehension checks, to cater to learners' preferences, to allow students to more freely make clarification requests, and to reduce student anxiety.

Not only do some students feel their cultural identity and value being threatened by English-only policies (Weschler, 1999), they also feel less of a connection with their native English speaking teachers (Cole, 2008). According to Adjemian's (1976, in Ellis, 1994) interlanguage theory, L2 students possess in their minds a personal language that lies somewhere between their L1 and the target language. New knowledge about the L2 is adapted into what is already known (from their L1). Students will continue thinking in their L1, says Weschler, so why not let them process their L1 thinking aloud?

Auerbach (1993) and Nation (1997) both argue in favour of L1 use to give classroom instructions. They argue that clear, comprehensible instructions result in less frustration and anxiety when approaching a new task. Auerbach continues to state that lower affective barriers facilitate a quicker acquisition rate of the L2. Harbord (in Meyer, 2008) presents the same argument from the perspective of an L2-only classroom: "if students are unfamiliar with a new approach the teacher who cannot or will not give an explanation in the L1 may cause considerable student de-motivation" (p.150). On the other hand, Duff & Polio (1990) voice concern that "eliminating English [L1] use (especially for classroom management) appears to be difficult once the students and teacher have become accustomed to it" (p.163).

Some studies have examined the students' feelings about L1 use in the classroom, and the results are overwhelmingly in favour of its inclusion, if only minimally. Tang's (2002) study shows 95% of students like when their teacher uses the L1. Schweers' (1999) study yielded similar results, with 88.7% students in favour of L1 use, however, the vast majority (99%) wanted the *teacher* to use the L2 exclusively. Ferrer's (2002) study found that most students believed using a comparison method (between L1 and L2) resulted in more effective, or better,

learning.

Auerbach (1993) completed a study in which students learning English had a desire to express their thoughts in the L2, but lacked the ability. Through the use of L1 (by teacher and students), they were able to scaffold what they knew (as a class) and work towards building their sentences in English. Furthermore, Meyer (2008) suggests “allowing for the use of the student’s L1 may help students who would otherwise not speak out of embarrassment” (p.151).

Studies have been conducted in Japanese universities, but I could not find any done in the public or private secondary schools, where English education often begins. Auerbach’s study was conducted in the United States, in FL situations, but her findings do not necessarily transfer across cultures, particularly in Japan, where students are much more hesitant to use L2 in the classroom.

Research Questions

In conducting this research, I propose to find answers to the following questions:

1. According to Japanese university students, what are the perceived benefits, drawbacks, and motivational effects of L1 use by Native English Speaking Teachers (NESTs)?
2. According to students, what is the optimal amount of L1 to include in the EFL classroom? In what situations is it most helpful? In what situations is it least helpful?

Method

I am currently teaching in a private Japanese university. Of my six different classes, I conducted this research in three of them. Two of them were first-year classes which had a strong emphasis on oral fluency but also worked on reading and writing skills. One of these classes had just six students, all of whom scored among the lower 33% of first year students on placement tests. The second class comprised of 14 students who ranked in the middle 33% of their peers on these same tests. The third class consisted of 13 mid-level second year students, but sparse attendance led me to limit the research pool to the 8 most consistent attenders.

In general, my students are good-natured, but not particularly academically-

inclined. The university is located in the relatively small city of Himeji, and many of the students come from even more urban areas. Generally speaking, the quality of English education they have received prior to entering university is lower than that of students who grew up in urban areas. What's more, despite this university's best intentions, it does not measure up to major schools in the area. Students in the Faculty of Human Studies score an average of 350 on the TOEIC test. Himeji welcomes many tourists every year, which would lead one to believe students have ample opportunity to speak English. However, shyness and lack of confidence often leads to minimal English outside the classroom.

While not always essential to reveal the purpose of research to students, I did so with these students. Particularly when it comes to looking at motivational factors, the students' honest and detailed input is essential to the success of the research. As a result, an initial questionnaire (see Appendix A) was given after a proper explanation of its purpose. It was also translated into the students' L1 to ensure full comprehension.

On occasion, I had students reflect on my L1 use in journals. I provided guiding questions to help students out, but they were also free to write about their feelings towards the class in general, and L1 use in particular. As much as possible, I phrased questions and prompts so as to not encourage biased entries.

Towards the end of the research period, select students were interviewed for more specific information and elaborations. Since the focus of the interviews varied depending on journal and questionnaire content, the interviews had an open-ended format. Also, based on the overall results of initial data collection, I also conducted one focus-group interview, in which I hoped students would "stimulate and be stimulated by each other" (Nunan & Bailey, 2009, p.315).

I also journaled once per week, reflecting on particular episodes in which L1 use (or non-use) had an effect on a specific student or the entire class. My teacher journal served as a way to contrast the teachers' and students' perceived views of what students needed. I then determined if my L1 use was optimal, and how I could adjust it in the future.

Student journals and interviews were examined for particular themes. Similar comments that came from more than 20% of the class were deemed "significant" or "having pedagogical implications." In other words, they were considered a valid answer to research question 1. When only a few students responded in a

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particular way, it was also noted, but not deemed as reflective of the entire class, therefore, not a primary answer to the first research question. The closed-ended portion of the questionnaires were quantified and analyzed as well. While not as rich in detail or anecdotes, these quantities will give a concrete, comprehensive summary of the findings.

Findings

The initial survey, which was completed by 28 students, yielded predictable results. Over 71% of students said that Japanese had a place in the English classroom. Students said they wish for the teacher to speak Japanese “a little” (25%) or “sometimes” (68%) and that it is best used to explain difficult vocabulary (46%), expressions (46%) and grammatical points (50%). They answered that the use of Japanese helped them understand difficult concepts better (86%). As for how much Japanese they thought the teacher should use, the most common answer was 30%. On the whole, all but one student said that the amount of Japanese presently used in class was helpful.

The journals mostly backed up the findings of the survey, although it was interesting to see a discrepancy in when students thought Japanese was helpful. Rather than wanting the extra help when it came to vocabulary and grammar, many students talked about the importance of explaining in-class activity instructions/rules, homework and test preparation strategies. Many students talked about how they sometimes felt a lack of confidence in even starting homework if they were not sure what was expected of them. They also said that in class, before an activity began, if they did not feel they knew how to get started, it was difficult to take the first step. One student even said that the whole time she did an activity, she was questioning whether she had understood instructions properly or not. Clearly the affective barrier remains in place for these students unless they have the assurance that they know exactly how to proceed.

During the interview time, some students talked about their other classes. One class, in which no Japanese is spoken by the NEST, had students completing the task in completely different ways because everyone understood the instructions differently. They also said that sometimes just a few words of Japanese made things even more confusing, because of the teacher’s limited L1 use. They would have preferred if the teacher used more Japanese to clarify his instructions.

My own reflection journal showed me that I sometimes use too much L1 when I do not consciously monitor myself. On some days when I sat down to reflect, I realized that my use of Japanese was increased due to my own laziness, or my desire to get my point across to students as quickly as possible without regard to their English language development. However, I also found that when I paid close attention to students' facial expressions while explaining something, I could gauge (or at least guess) their level of comprehension and then proceed with limited L1 usage or continue to use simple L2 expressions and vocabulary. I also noticed that when I had a plan to use L1 ahead of time, I often "warned" students that I was about to switch into their native language. This seemed to be an effective strategy when using more than one language while teaching.

Conclusion

I believe this study shows that L1 use in the class should not be taboo, and when used appropriately, it can have many benefits to students. Even teachers who do not have knowledge of the students' L1 can benefit from learning a few key phrases to help students in some situations. However, it is important to use these expressions in isolation from the L2-in other words, no code switching within a single sentence!

Unfortunately, this study may not have much external validity. There are too many external factors that are beyond the scope of this study, and cannot be widely applied to all NEST L1 use in the classroom. The degree of effectiveness of L1 use in the classroom depends on the NEST's level of proficiency. Atkinson (1993, in Cole, 1998) warns that the NEST should only use L1 if his ability exceeds that of the students in the L2. Furthermore, the particular school at which research was conducted is not necessarily reflective of the overall Japanese (let alone EFL) population. Since the school is private, rural and co-ed, its results may not even apply at a nearby public unisex learning institution.

In order to widen the scope of this study, it could be conducted over two years - the span of the students' mandatory course load. Should this approach be taken, a psychometric approach may reveal significant differences in test scores. The same study could be replicated at a larger urban school to see if attitudes differ depending on school size. In order to make the study more meaningful for the general population, it could be conducted in higher level classes as well. It

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would also be interesting to conduct this research in several classes involving several instructors. Another option would be to have NESTs with varying L1 ability teaching the same students. It would be interesting to see the difference in the impact of L1 use based on whether the NEST has N1, N2, or N3 (near-native, advanced, intermediate) levels on the Japanese Language Proficiency Test. It would also be interesting to have the same teacher conduct this research over the course of an entire school year. The first semester could see the instructor using no L1 whatsoever, and a judicious amount of L1 during the second semester. Students' journal entries could have them comparing their motivation level based on the absence or presence of L1 in the classroom.

Regardless of teaching situations, I firmly believe that language teachers need to rethink the antiquated view that L1 has no place in the L2 classroom. When used properly, its benefits far outweigh all of its perceived weaknesses.

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Appendix A-Stage 1 Student Questionnaire (modified from Tang, 2002)

We would like to learn more about your attitude toward the use of Japanese in the English classroom. Your answers will be used for research purposes only (not your grades), so please be honest. Thank you for your help.

1. Should Japanese be allowed in the classroom?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

2. Do you like your teacher to use Japanese in the class?
 - a. Never
 - b. A little
 - c. Sometimes
 - d. A lot

3. When do you think it is helpful to have Japanese in the English classroom?
 - a. to explain new vocabulary items (especially difficult words)
 - b. to practice phrases and expressions (doing translation exercises)
 - c. to explain difficult grammar points
 - d. to give instructions for activities
 - e. to explain the best way to study or remember English
 - f. Other: _____

4. Why do you think the use of Japanese is necessary in the classroom?
 - a. It helps me to understand difficult ideas better.
 - b. It helps me to understand new vocabulary items better.
 - c. It makes me feel at ease, comfortable and less stressed.
 - d. It helps me to concentrate better.
 - e. Other: _____

5. Do you think the use of Japanese in the classroom helps you learn English?
 - a. Not at all
 - b. A little
 - c. Somewhat
 - d. A lot

6. How often do you think Japanese should be used in the classroom?
 - a. Never
 - b. Rarely
 - c. Sometimes
 - d. Often

7. What percentage of the time do you think Japanese should be used in class?
 - a. 0%
 - b. 5%
 - c. 10%
 - d. 30%
 - e. 50%
 - f. over 50%

8. How often would you say your past OC teachers have used Japanese in the classroom?
 - a. 0%
 - b. 5%
 - c. 10%
 - d. 30%
 - e. 50%
 - f. over 50%

9. Did you think the amount of Japanese used in OC class was appropriate and helpful?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

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