

Approaches to L1 use in the EFL Classroom

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Abstract

For many years educators have considered the English-only approach in classrooms as the correct and only appropriate way to teach EFL. Teaching methods have guided this approach by either explicitly banning the use of students' L1 or simply ignoring it. However, recent research is suggesting that the L1 is a valid and real element in the EFL classroom and that the English-only approach may be out of step in a truly learner-centred classroom. The aim of this article is not to outline the detailed debate surrounding this issue, but instead to present practical ways teachers might choose to make use of L1 in the L2 classroom, supported by the relevant literature.

The idea of using Japanese in the EFL classroom is controversial. Many teachers in Japan have learnt that the ideal language learning environment exclusively uses English. In this way, students are exposed to maximum target language input and are given authentic opportunities to use L2 without resorting to their L1.

Yet this method of completely cutting out L1 may be inefficient and out of step with a genuinely learner-centred classroom. Clearly, the majority of the lesson *should* be in the target language. However, much current research supports the idea that L1 is a valid and real element that exists in the EFL classroom (as opposed to ESL classrooms whereby the lingua-franca is the second language) and that it should become an acceptable tool for language learning. (Weschler 1997, Burden 2000, Cook 2001, Nation 2003).

When and How Japanese (L1) can be used in the EFL classroom

So, how can L1 be used to help students, particularly low-level students, make the most of their EFL experience at university? In order to provide some order to the wide range of ideas, this article will present them in three distinct, yet overlapping, groups.

The first group is **Condition-Oriented Ideas**. The focus is on using L1 to create the ideal conditions for learning to take place. Teachers must find ways to motivate students, ways to make them feel self-confident and ways to make them feel comfortable and willing to take risks with their L2. This idea is based on Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1985, p. 100).

The second group is **Bottom Up Language Focused Ideas**. Quite simply, this group includes all those ways L1 can be used to help students decode word and sentence level L2.

The final group is **Top Down Language Focused Ideas**, whereby the focus is on how to help students access prior knowledge of the topic in their L1 before they attempt a cognitively challenging L2 activity.

Condition-Oriented Ideas

To foster group cooperation

Most people don't like being told what to do. This is especially the case if it involves telling students how to communicate with each other. Telling a low-level class that 'no Japanese is to be used' effectively sets up a no-win situation, pitting the teacher against the students. Recognizing and respecting the students' first language will more likely lead to a more cooperative class and may be an important step in bringing

down the affective filter.

To help students understand instructions:

When giving instructions, they should be explained clearly in English in a step-by-step manner. Writing them on the board in English further illustrates what students are expected to do. However, there may still be *some* times when some students will be left in the dark.

Students can be given the opportunity to clarify their understanding by explaining to each other what they think they have to do in the activity in Japanese. Teachers who have never done this kind of process may be surprised at the number of students who realize they did not understand in the first place.

The point is that they are given a non-threatening opportunity to qualify their understanding with a partner. If the two don't 'get it' they are happy to ask a pair nearby because it is their own language and they are unthreatened.

Spencer (2003, p. 12) put it nicely when she wrote about her own experiences learning a second language. "I gained an awareness of how teachers can encroach upon the rights, freedoms, preferences and needs of their learners as individuals due to the influence of prevailing educational theories."

Feedback and Opinions

If a teacher really wants to get feedback about their lessons or a particular activity, persisting in L2 is unlikely to be productive, especially at low levels of L2 proficiency. Allowing students to use Japanese will provide much fuller responses.

Atkinson (1993, p. 18) advocates using “L1 problem clinics” to discuss points the students haven’t understood. If a teacher doesn’t speak Japanese, this is still a valid exercise because students can point out, or write down things they don’t understand for the teacher to review.

A recent paper titled ‘The use and abuse of Japanese in the university English class’ (Stephens 2006), although generally supporting the English-only cause, subtly highlights the value of L1. While surveying students’ attitudes regarding the amount of Japanese that should be used in English classes, Stephens (2006, p. 14) indicates that “students were instructed to respond in Japanese”.

To create basic motivational conditions

According to Wlodkowski (1986, as cited in Dörnyei 2001, p. 37) *listening* to a person is the “single most powerful transaction that occurs between ourselves and another person that tells that individual that we accept him as a human being”. As teachers we must listen to our students. Particularly at low levels of L2, allowing students the opportunity to communicate in L1 builds trust and understanding.

To make use of culturally loaded words

There are some meaningful, emotionally loaded Japanese words with strong connotations that can be more effective than their English counterparts. Take the word, *gambatte* for example. A child hears it from when they are learning to walk. A parents’ voice calling, *gambare* from the sidelines at the sports festival comes to mind. The word *gambatte* is loaded with meaning to a Japanese person. If you say in English, ‘Try hard’ or ‘Good luck’, it sounds empty and lacks the emotional pull of the Japanese version.

According to Cook (2001, p. 407), “telling students how well they have done in their own language may make the praise more ‘real’. (...) When using L1, the teacher is treating the students as their real selves rather than dealing with assumed L2 personas”.

Prodromou (2001, as cited in Gabrielatos 2001, p. 34) adds to this by saying, “the bilingual/bicultural teacher is in a position to enrich the process of learning by using the mother tongue as a resource, and by using the culture which the mother tongue embodies they can facilitate the progress of their students towards the other tongue, the other culture.”

To validate students as individuals

According to Atkinson (1993, p. 13), “For many learners (in particular adults and teenagers), occasional use of L1 gives them the opportunity to show that they are intelligent, sophisticated people.”

There are times when a student will want to tell a teacher or class member something but is unable to say it in English, especially at low levels. It is at times like these that the teacher must balance their English teaching outcomes with individual needs. It is true that perhaps this student, if forced to use English, will be able to explain the topic and come away with a sense of achievement. However, more often than not at low levels, the student will shy away from saying anything at all and an opportunity for communication will be lost. If a teacher feels that the student wants to convey an important message, it can be very effective to let the student tell it in Japanese. The teacher can answer in English.

Auerbach (1993) indicates that starting with L1 gives a sense of security and validates the learner's lived experiences, allowing them to express themselves. The learner is then willing to experiment and take risks with English.

To explain methodology

Japanese students who have studied using the grammar-translation method may not understand or respect the communicative way of studying. Of course some love it. Others however, may realise the value more if it is explained to them. At low levels of L2 proficiency, it makes sense to explain this kind of difficult concept in the students' first language.

Humor

Humor can be motivating. And sometimes, if teachers are willing to make themselves look silly, using Japanese can create a relaxed, friendly environment. Making jokes, quoting commercials or TV shows is just a light-hearted thing to do and can relax students.

Bottom Up Language Focused Ideas

Translation of vocabulary

The Communicative Approach advocates maximising comprehensible L2 input in class time. For EFL students whose exposure to L2 is mainly limited to class time, it is a waste not to provide valuable L2 practice in this time. However, there are some occasions when persisting in L2 can be a waste of this valuable time and when a simple, fast direct translation can save time. Translating vocabulary is a good example

here.

“No matter how hard they may try, adult learners simply cannot escape the influence of the first language. They will always be asking themselves, “What does _____ mean?” and decoding the answer in their first language. Suppressing this natural tendency only adds to the counter-productive tension already in the class and raises the affective filter of the student that much higher” (Weschler, 1997, p. 4).

Explanation of grammar

Grammar can be explained in English. However, as mentioned above, it is sometimes more time efficient to explain a point in Japanese and then move on to *use* the English in a communicative activity.

Checking comprehension

Similar to the earlier example of allowing students to check their understanding of instructions, at any point, if something really needs to be understood, L1 can be used to ensure they have understood.

Translation

Translation has a bad reputation because it is connected with methods used several hundred years ago. Yet more course books, such as the Headway Series are now recommending controlled use of L1. Instead of using translation as the main means of language learning, it is now being suggested as just another useful class exercise (Soars and Soars 1996, as cited in Cole 1998).

To compare L1 and L2 for error analysis

L1 is often said to interfere with L2 and this is certainly true with pronunciation.

Many Japanese students have katakana sounding English and it seems most of them are completely unaware of this. Lee (1965, as cited in Cole 1998) has shown how some knowledge of the students' first language can be useful in helping them analyze common errors caused by 'interference'. Cole (1998) gives the example of 'McDonalds' becoming 'Makudonarudo' and suggests teaching consonant clusters to get students out of the katakana habit.

Top Down Language Focused Reasons

To Provide Scaffolding for Cognitively Challenging Material

Teachers often complain of Japanese students' lack of imagination when it comes to brainstorming topics. We should remember though, that many students have never had experience at this kind of activity and they need to be trained. The textbook approach is now for mind mapping, and draw a web type activities. Often this is fine *if* the topic doesn't demand a high cognitive load. For a cognitively challenging topic, students can be allowed to speak in Japanese in pairs or groups, but brainstorm ideas into English. They then move into L2. "Whenever a teacher feels that a meaning based L2 task might be beyond the capabilities of the learners, a small amount of L1 discussion can help overcome some of the obstacles" (Nation 2003, p. 3).

Knight's (1996) research supports this idea.

Jones and Tetroe (1987, as cited in Wolfersberger 2003) state that, in general,

proficient L2 learners do not depend heavily on L1 to drive the writing process because they have a sufficient level of L2 automaticity and knowledge to think and plan in L2. However, Wolfersberger (2003) cites several authors who indicate that lower L2 proficiency writers rely more heavily on their L1 during the writing process in order to sustain the process and prevent a complete breakdown in language (Arndt, 1987, Cumming, 1989, Raimes 1985, Uzawa and Cumming 1989).

Conclusion

The lists of ideas, presented in this article, can create the misunderstanding that ‘Japanese use is OK anytime’. However this is not true. A teacher who purposefully and skilfully uses a limited amount of L1, with the aim of steering students towards L2, should feel self-assured and confident rather than feeling even remotely guilty. Instead of throwing away this great resource that is a common language, not to mention culture, L1 should become widely acceptable as a tool for second language learners and teachers alike.

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