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The Role of L1 Support in Communicative ELT: A Guide for Teachers in Japan

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Research into the issue of English Only vs. first language (L1) presence in the classroom is revealing a clear role for the L1 in communicative English language teaching (ELT) (Auerbach, 1993; Pellowe, 1998; Burden, 2000). What this role is, however, is not always made explicit in teacher training programs. This article develops a framework of teacher talk, student talk, and the language used in ELT materials. This framework, supported by research on motivation and “immediacy,” student needs and wants, and other English as a foreign language (EFL)-based research, will help teachers

in Japan achieve a balance between English and L1 support, as they make informed decisions in their own teaching contexts.

教室の中で使用される言語を考慮する上でしばしば問題となる「英語のみ」対L1(学習者の母国語)の存在への研究は、コミュニカティブELT(英語教育法)におけるL1の明瞭な役割が明らかにされつつあります(Auerbach, 1993年; Pellowe, 1998年; Burden, 2000年)。しかしながら、教員養成プログラムの中で、その役割は必ずしも明白にされていませんこの論文では授業の中で教員の発言、学生の発言、またELT教材の中で使用されている言葉についてのフレームワークを詳しく説明します。モチベーション、イミディアシー(直接性)、学習者のニーズ/要望、また他のEFLの研究に基づいたこのフレームワークにより、日本で英語教育に携わる教員たちは、それぞれの状況の中で自らの根拠に基づいた判断ができ、また英語とL1サポートとの適切なバランスを保つことができるでしょう。

Introduction

During presentations and workshops on mother tongue (L1) support in the EFL classroom, teachers typically pose very specific questions about how much Japanese language support they should use in their particular contexts, and in what areas that support should be provided. That so many teachers have questions about how to provide appropriate L1 support is not surprising -- TESOL programs at all levels on the market today provide neither explicit training nor adequate theoretical information on the subject. Teachers are left to work things out on their own.

It is unclear why this area of methodology is ignored in teacher training programs. While the English Only paradigm

continues to be dominant in communicative ELT, research into teacher practice reveals that the L1 is used as a learning resource in many ESL classes (Auerbach, 1993). In EFL contexts, Ho & Van Naerssen (1986) demonstrated that even teachers who *support* the English Only paradigm use the L1 in class when doing so benefits learning. Moreover, “when the native language *is* used, practitioners, researchers, and learners consistently report positive results” (Auerbach, 1993, p. 18). In light of this research into teacher practice, it would seem that there is indeed a need for teachers to reflect on how and when to provide mother tongue support.

This article is intended for teachers of adult Japanese learners of English, and was written to help clarify the role of the L1 in the classroom. The article first examines how Japanese can be used to support learning goals in the following areas of classroom language use:

- Teacher talk
- Student talk
- ELT materials

Thinking of L1 support in each of these areas separately rather than as a single entity can help teachers strike a balance between Japanese and English. The article includes sample materials and needs analysis questions, and concludes with wider implications regarding L1 use and policy in Japan.

Teacher talk

Supporting linguistic goals

Across a wide range of contexts, Japanese university learners concur that L1 support from the teacher, while necessary, should be limited. As to where this support should be given, answers vary. In a survey by Burden (2000), students indicated that they wanted support for interactions that were both pedagogical and “para-pedagogical” (Lin, 1988, p. 88) such as “relaxing the students” (Burden, 2000, p.8). In a survey of 160 university learners (Critchley, 1999), in which respondents wanted an average of 20% of teacher talk to be in Japanese, pedagogical goals were dominant. Teaching linguistic items and explaining about tests, homework, classroom activities and objectives accounted for 68% of all responses coded. These results suggest that while teachers should use Japanese in a limited manner, each teacher may find it best to survey their particular learners to clarify where support should be given.

Teachers who use Japanese typically do so in an unplanned manner when they perceive that the English being used has gone beyond the proficiency level of the students. A “brief but cogent use” (Modica, 1994, p. 289) of Japanese is used to keep students “tuned in” to what the teacher is saying, turning “incomprehensible messages in the target language” (Weschler, 1997) into input that is comprehensible, and therefore usable by learners. When this input involves class rules, expectations or assessment information, increased understanding can also lead to increased student participation in the learning process (Modica, 1994).

This unplanned L1 support typically takes the form of “spot-translation,” which is an isolated word or expression in Japanese

as an aside during primarily English communication. Use of such spot-translations not only supports student understanding, but can prevent classroom interactions from becoming perpetual negotiations of meaning, as is commonly the case in monolingual ELT (Pellowe, 1998). As a case in point, I recorded 10 minutes of a normal private lesson between a native speaker and a Japanese student, conducted entirely in English. The entire 10 minutes was used to teach the following 4 expressions, all of which arose incidentally and sequentially:

So far (3.5 minutes)

Fast asleep (1.5 minutes)

Strange (3 minutes)

According to (2 minutes)

Not only was this interaction inefficient in terms of time, in spite of lengthy negotiation of meaning, the student's use of "fast asleep" and "according to" indicated that she had grasped neither the meaning nor the usage of these expressions. Spot translation could have greatly improved the learning outcomes both in terms of time and understanding. For example, rather than spending 2 minutes working toward a misunderstanding of the meaning of "according to," the teacher could have spent a few seconds giving a spot translation, followed by a minute assisting the student to develop this "knowledge kernel" (Schmitt, 1995, p. 34) through further communication in English, using the new expression in original and meaningful ways.

It is interesting to note that proponents of the English-Only paradigm disagree with this form of L1 support. Indeed, Polio and Duff (1994) maintain that the benefits of higher level explanations, saved time or increased student-teacher bonding are not worth the time that is lost from negotiation of meaning.

Although their opinions are not backed by any quantitative research, they do reflect the choices that teachers must make regarding which elements to emphasize in classroom learning.

Supporting students psychologically

The number of JALT articles and conference titles over the years that have included the words "motivating students" are testimony to the importance of increasing student motivation toward learning. Indeed, Gardner found that "regardless of language aptitude, motivated students were more likely to study longer and harder and acquire a second language than other students" (In Strong, 2001, p. 16). The L1 can be a useful tool to motivate students when used to promote "immediacy" in the classroom.

Research into immediacy, which has been defined by educational psychologists as "the degree of perceived physical and/or psychological closeness between people" (Mehrabian, cited in Christophel, 1990, pg. 325), indicates that students who like and respect a teacher on a personal level will experience greater cognitive learning, and become more motivated toward subject matter (McCroskey & Richmond, 1992). Moreover, "students who become 'turned on' to a subject will continue to learn long after the teacher who 'turned them on' is out of the picture. It is the essence of lifelong learning" (ibid, p. 116).

Though teachers should build such relationships with students through English whenever possible, an all-English exchange of the complex ideas that can promote immediacy may not be possible with unmotivated or lower level learners. With these learners, teachers should use Japanese when appropriate to build positive and mutually supportive relationships that will promote student motivation.

Student talk

In any language class, there are some ideas that learners may not be able to, or may not *want* to express in English. When peer-teaching abstract language points, or participating in full-class discussions about language use, students may be more inclined to contribute when allowed to do so in Japanese (see Hemmendinger, 1997).

In a recent class, a discussion began about the social rules governing opinions. There was learning going on in both directions as students told me about social rules in Japan, and I countered with who gives opinions and how opinions are given in the West. It is safe to say that this discussion, which helped further the learning goals of the unit of work, could never have happened if students had been limited to speaking only in English.

Indeed, the L1 plays an integral role in metalinguistic discussions such as these in Australian first-language literacy programs (NSW DSE, 1993). There is no reason to believe that the situation should be any different in Japan. As long as learners are given the *choice* of which language they use, the general class atmosphere should become one in which any student at any level can feel “qualified” to say what is on his or her mind.

ELT materials

Research into focus on form (Nunan, 1989) and into the practices of good language learners (Naiman, Fröhlich, Stern, & Todesco, 1996) reveals the importance of metalinguistic explanation in adult second language learning, particularly when learning involves abstract notions. Some of this explanation, however, must be done in the L1 if it is to be understood by lower level learners. To avoid using the L1, many communicative

textbooks on the market today focus on everyday themes such as describing family or telling time. The non-abstract nature of this material is considered “easy” since the concepts are clear without L1 explanation, and can be readily demonstrated using pictures and realia (time is an abstract notion, but it can be demonstrated using clocks, which are concrete).

Modica (1994, p. 300) argues that while such concrete content may be easier, it is seldom interesting to adult learners, and that the typical Japanese university learner is “rarely engaged by exercises describing the colored clothing on a cartoon character.” L1-supported materials can eliminate the need to base content on what is easiest to teach, and instead work toward teaching learners “as efficiently as possible the vocabulary and structures needed to express their abstract ideas” (Weschler, 1997, p. 2), allowing students to “go beyond their current linguistic abilities (and the mundane) in their work” (Modica, 1994, p. 300).

When writing materials, a good rule of thumb is to use the L1 for any content that would otherwise require bilingual explanation or dictionary use. For example, in Appendix A, Japanese has been used to tell students what they should do when stating problems, and gives some translation of new expressions. The in-class activity, on the other hand, is done entirely in English. Activities such as these are easily demonstrated, and give students authentic exposure to English in use. Thus, the L1 is used here to selectively teach *about* the language, and English is used when students are practicing *using* the new language.

In cases where students are required to look up new words on their own, they should be allowed to use bilingual dictionaries. Learners should, however, be taught to use dictionaries in a way that supports communicative learning as spot translation does when used effectively by a teacher. Wen & Johnson (1997) found that “good” language learners tend to rely on bilingual

dictionaries when learning new content, but then turn to more holistic guessing strategies when doing fluency work such as reading for pleasure or having casual conversations. Semi-extensive reading (Critchley, 1998) or other activities that combine a focus on form with fluency-building communication can reinforce balanced dictionary use.

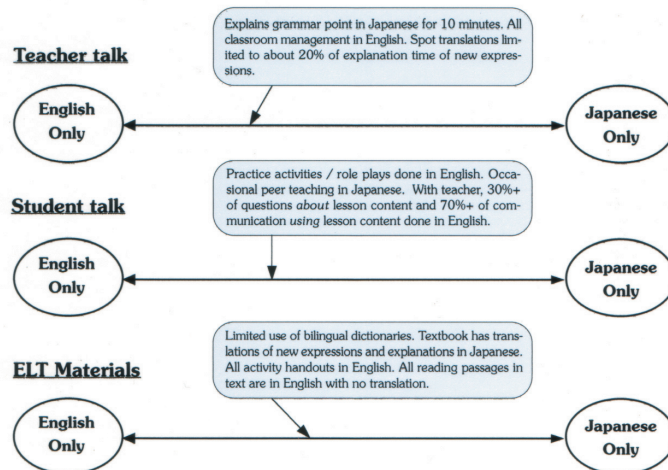
Balancing L1 support and English in ELT

There are currently no definitive figures to which teachers can turn to find the “best” amount of L1 support. This is not surprising given the variability of learning contexts. Teachers can, however, consult learners about the quantity and quality of Japanese support they expect. Auerbach (1993) cites research showing that when involved in the formation of language rules in class, learners are more likely to follow, and indeed enforce these rules when broken. Appendix B contains some questions that can be included in a needs analysis to elicit student opinion on this matter. This needs analysis was originally written for lower proficiency learners, and was therefore written bilingually.

After language policy has been established, teachers must self-monitor. Each language-use area should be treated separately, as shown in the clines below. The L1 support for each cline is the language use average over a unit of work (which may run over several lessons). For example, in the cline describing teacher talk, a number of interactions are described including language explanations, classroom management and spot translation. While each interaction requires varying amounts of Japanese support, the average support given would be approximately 25%.

Teachers of false-beginner university students may need to provide a great deal of Japanese support at the beginning of a course. This support, however, should gradually be reduced as

the learners become more accustomed to communicating and learning through English, and as more English gets recycled in from previous lessons. By the end of the course, teachers should aim for less than 25% Japanese support from teacher talk, less than 35% from student talk, and less than 40% from instructional materials. However, teachers may find that their learners require more or less support depending on the needs, wants and proficiency of the learners, the beliefs of the teacher, the focus of the lesson, and the function of the interactions taking place.



Implications to TESOL in Japan

In all teaching contexts, learner perspectives should be polled regarding how language policy affects their learning. Anecdotal evidence from colleagues, both Japanese and foreign, indicates that learners are typically reticent to approach teachers with complaints for fear of insulting the teacher. A brief, anonymous questionnaire can help teachers and educational institutions reflect on practice and policy, ensuring a learning environment that matches student expectations.

In the case of foreign teachers, special care must be taken to ensure that any Japanese used is clear and correct. When teachers cannot speak Japanese, even an untrained bilingual tutor can help students make significant progress (D'Annunzio, 1991). Foreign teachers should, however, aim to gain enough proficiency in Japanese to provide support on their own. Given the rapidly growing body of research on the potential of L1 support in EFL contexts, learning Japanese should be thought of no differently than any other form of professional development aimed at improving a teacher's repertoire of classroom skills and strategies. As Modica writes, a "teacher who understands the L1 empowers learners in both the educational and social spheres" (1994, p. 299).

Conclusion

Even with limited support in Japanese, most EFL classrooms in Japan would be far to the left of the graphs presented above, with significant quantities of English input and negotiation of meaning taking place. Nevertheless, teachers should monitor the quantity and quality of Japanese used by the teacher, the student, and in ELT materials. Surveying student opinions on this matter can help ensure an effective balance of in-class language use that meets learner expectations.

For the researcher in EFL, more quantitative data is needed to clarify what balance of English vs. L1 support will achieve the best learning results, and the greatest increases in long-term motivation on the part of the learner. Any conclusions reached on this matter may need to be revised in the current move to a more communicative pedagogy in Japan: while a significant amount of support may be necessary this year, 10 years later this need may drop considerably (Rebecca Benoit, e-mail correspondence).

Finally, given the research in support of using the mother tongue as a language resource, it may be time for TESOL programs to train EFL professionals how to balance the target language with L1 support. Until such training is available, however, teachers must do their best to balance language choice through a combination of experience, instinct, and negotiation with learners.

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Appendix A

Taken from *Encounters* (Ichiyama et al, 2001, p. 27)

Conversation Stage ①②③④⑤

Stage 3: Stating the Problem

授業に関する用件がある場合、先生に次のことを伝えましょう。

1. The problem you wish to discuss (用件はなにか)
2. A brief explanation of the problem (その用件の説明または理由)

Problem	Brief Explanation
I'm sorry, but... I was late for today's class. (今日の授業に遅れました。)	I overslept. (寝坊したんです。) I had a problem with my bike. (自転車の調子が悪かったです。)
I was absent from class. (授業を欠席しました。)	I had a cold. (風邪をひいたんです。) I missed the bus. (バスに乗り遅れたんです。)
I missed the midterm exam on Monday. (月曜日に中間試験を受けませんでした。)	There was an accident on the Sobu line, so my train was late. (総武線で事故があって、電車が遅れたんです。) I had to go to the hospital. My mother was really sick. (母の具合が悪くて、病院に行っていました。)

Note!

「試験日に欠席した」などの比較的深刻な問題の場合は、きちんとした説明が求められます。しっかり準備して先生を助ねましょう。

Activity 4

Use each photo to explain your class-related problem. One example has been done for you.



1. *I'm sorry, but I missed your class on Friday. I was really sick, so I went to the doctor's.*





3. _____



4. _____

Appendix B

Sample needs analysis questions to elicit student expectations of Japanese usage standards for teacher and students.

How much Japanese do you want the teacher to use?

授業中、先生にどのくらい日本語を使って欲しいですか？

	English Only! 英語だけ使うべき	Sometimes たまに日本語を使って欲しい	Always 常に日本語を使って欲しい
When explaining instructions 授業中の指示か説明する際に			
When teaching new expressions 新しい表現か俗語の説明をする際に			
When talking about myself 先生が自分のことについて話す際に			

How much Japanese do you think the students should use?

授業中、あなたたち学習者は、どのくらい日本語を使うべきだと思いますか？

	English Only! 英語だけ使うべき	Sometimes たまに日本語を使いたい	Always 常に日本語を使うべき
When asking about vocabulary or grammar 語彙か文法について尋ねる際に			
When talking to other students about class-related things 他の学生と授業に関することについて話す際に			
When talking about personal/non class-related things 個人的な授業と関係しないことについて話す際に			