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Challenging Assumptions  
Looking In, Looking Out

# Dilemmas over L1 use in communicative language classes: The European Union project

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An assumption in both communicative language teaching theory and the practice of communicative language classes in Japanese universities is that learners should use the target language only and should avoid using their L1. In our presentation, however, we demonstrated a collaborative project involving four different language classes—French, German, Spanish, and English—in which the need to achieve mutual comprehension brought to the fore a number of dilemmas concerning appropriate language use in communicative classes. The European Union project, which required students to deliver bilingual presentations, not only solved a communication problem, but also enhanced language learning and motivation.

コミュニカティブ・ランゲージ・ティーチング (CLT) の理論と、日本の大学の授業での CLT の実践においては、学習者が目標言語のみを使用し、母語の使用は避けるべきであることが前提とされている。しかしながら、異なる4つの外国語—フランス語、ドイツ語、スペイン語、英語—の授業が合同で実施した本プロジェクトでは、互いに理解しあうことが必要となることで、コミュニケーション重視の授業での適切な言語使用について、前述の前提を問い直すこととなった。本プロジェクトでは生徒に、目標言語と母語の2ヶ国語での発表をさせたところ、伝達の際に生じる問題を解決しただけでなく、生徒の言語学習を促進し、モチベーションも向上させた。



Over the past 2 decades, mainstream research and practice of foreign language teaching has come to be dominated by the paradigm of communicative language teaching (CLT), the main characteristic of which is “an emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language” (Nunan, 1991, p. 279). Relating this to classroom practice in Japanese schools and universities, this should mean that the use of Japanese is excluded as much as possible so that learning of the new language can take place within that language, and not through translation or comparison with Japanese. In reality, research and anecdotal evidence indicates that the teaching of foreign languages in Japan is mainly conducted following a traditional grammar-translation (*yakudoku*) method (Gorsuch, 1998), with communicative language practice reserved for subsequent and separate classes. In many schools and institutions of higher education, communicative language classes are seen as the “icing on the cake” of language practice, an opportunity where learners can put into practice what they have already acquired through comparative study of the language, rather than a place where learners will learn something about the language for the first time.

The general assumption, whether influenced by CLT or the Japanese separation of explicit (*yakudoku*) and implicit (communicative) pedagogies, is that communicative language classes in schools and universities should be conducted in the target language alone or, at the very least, as much as possible. In our presentation, we acknowledged that this was our own assumption, and presented a project in which four different language classes—Spanish, German,

French, and English—came together to communicate their research and opinions about the countries of the languages they were studying. The need to find a way for students to use their target languages and at the same time convey information to others who did not speak that language prompted us to face and reassess our assumptions about our use of our own languages and of Japanese in our classrooms. In this article, we start by providing a historical overview of some of the debates that have been conducted on the desirability of CLT, particularly in the context of Asian education systems. We then describe the European project and explain how it led us to reconsider our thinking about L1 and L2 use in our teaching practice.

### Assumptions about communicative language teaching

As mentioned, CLT came into prevalence as a teaching method from the 1980s onwards. Backed by research in second language acquisition (SLA), CLT aimed to provide learners with activities or tasks, the fulfillment of which would give them opportunities and motivation to use language, while at the same time raising their awareness leading to acquisition of useful language structures and vocabulary. SLA also provided a rationale for use of the target language only in classes. The main proponent of this research was Stephen Krashen, whose “monitor hypothesis” (Krashen & Terrell, 1983) proposed that second language acquisition occurs through meaningful interaction in the target language—natural communication—in which speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying and understanding. This

approach, including the assumption of monolingual language classes, is apparent in textbooks published in the United States and the United Kingdom for global use, and in teacher training courses in these countries.

By the 1990s, however, some voices of dissent about the use of the target language only were beginning to appear. Auerbach (1993) criticized the use of English only in the ESL classroom, arguing that forcing learners to use the target language only denied learners a vital learning resource. Similarly, in the context of EFL, that is, where English is taught in non-English speaking countries, Holliday (1994) argued that a mismatch between CLT and local teaching practices and expectations can lead to disappointment and resentment on the parts of both teachers and learners. His study of the difficulties encountered by foreign specialists in introducing CLT to a university in Egypt led him to propose that the culture of CLT (which he saw as the product of the affluent and powerful English-speaking countries) was at odds with the culture of the local university. This mismatch led to the resistance of students to new methods and the disillusionment and resentment of teachers. Holliday's conclusion was that non-local language teachers would do better to familiarize themselves more closely with local educational cultures and expectations and adjust their own practices accordingly.

In light of this critical backlash against mainstream (Western) teaching practices, some teachers, particularly in the Asian context, have questioned the appropriateness or desirability of CLT in their classes. In a debate conducted in the *English Language Teaching Journal*, for example, Bax (2003) argued that CLT should be abandoned in Asian

classrooms, since it fails to take into account the context of language teaching. Liao (2004), writing from the viewpoint of English teaching in China, countered that, because it directly addresses the communicative competence of learners, CLT is better than the more rigid and limited grammar-based approach that prevailed until the 1980s. Most recently, Hiep (2007) has taken the middle ground: returning to the key principles of CLT, confusion about which he claims lies at the heart of the Bax-Liao debate, he examines their realization in the teaching practice of English teachers in Vietnam. His study shows that, although various issues are brought to the fore by using CLT theory in the Vietnamese context, the fact that there are issues to be resolved does not necessarily mean that CLT should be rejected.

In the project that we describe below, similarly, the specificities of the local context gave rise to particular issues that challenged certain aspects of CLT and posed a number of dilemmas concerning the use of the target language only in the classroom.

### The European project

In 2006-2007, four language teachers, all visiting Associate Professors at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies (TUFS), collaborated on a joint project which involved conducting paired joint classes with each other, and a final four-class students' conference. The teachers all taught classes in Communication Practice (*hyougen enshuu*) at the same time on a Thursday morning. The classes were elective courses, open to 3rd-year (Spanish, German, and French) and 4th-year (English) students. In the project, 92 students took

part (Spanish 24, German 24, French 18, and English 16). The English majors were generally more proficient in their target language than students in the other classes, although a few of the Spanish, French, and German major students had completed an exchange year abroad and were thus more advanced than their class peers.

The previous year, the French and German teachers had conducted a joint class on a theme of common interest: veterans of the First World War and their attitudes towards the former enemy country. The success of that initiative encouraged the French and German teachers to suggest a more ambitious project with other teachers, the result of which was the European project. This was a project in which students would research and present information about the country of their major language and its relations with other European countries.

### *Project development*

Teachers of the Communication Practice classes at TUFSS are free to use the contents and methods of their choice in their classes, the only assumption (by students and colleagues) being that these classes would provide opportunities for language practice. In developing the project, we agreed to combine classes in the second semester of the year. This meant that there was some variation in our syllabuses in the first semester, some of us using that semester to prepare for the European project, others working on different content.

Having agreed on a broad format—researching the target language country and Europe—several meetings were held in the first semester and initial weeks of the second semester

to work out the detailed *modus operandi* of the project. Language choice was a major issue of discussion. Three possibilities were considered:

- English only
- Japanese only
- Target language and Japanese

English was considered because it is a language that all students have studied sufficiently to pass a stringent university entrance examination, and most students continue to take English as a minor language. It was rejected because it did not give the French, German, and Spanish students the opportunity to use their target languages, but also because, as in the European Union itself, the dominance of English is resisted for political reasons even where its use, as the language that all EU delegates are likely to share, would be most practical. Japanese only was considered for similar reasons of practicality, but was rejected because the opportunity to use the target language would be lost. The bilingual option was adopted because it gave students the opportunity to use their target language, and was the most viable option to solve the problem of communication.

### *Research questions*

For the students, the joint project began 4 weeks into the second semester, when all four classes were instructed to discuss and formulate questions about the other three countries in the project. Students were asked to write questions under three categories: (a) general information about the country, (b) bilateral relations, and (c) attitudes

toward and policies regarding languages. Each class had to submit questions to their teachers both in their target language and in Japanese.

The following class, two students from each class were selected as ambassadors for their class and country, and visited each of the other classes, where they read out the questions of their class in their target language and in Japanese. After receiving copies of the research questions, the French, German, and Spanish classes translated the questions written in Japanese into their target language for the sake of language support and guidance. The English students, whose language ability was presumed to be much higher, did not require this support. All the classes divided themselves into groups, which would research the questions and prepare presentations of the answers. The teachers encouraged students to use their target language as much as possible during class discussion on the project. The classes were free to research their questions through use of the library and internet, as well as by asking the teacher and foreign students (*ryugakusei*) or friends from the country.

Four weeks were allotted to the preparation for the joint classes, including research, translation, and rehearsal, which included three 90-minute classes and a week of no classes during the university's cultural festival.

### **Joint classes**

Joint classes were arranged over 3 weeks in December, when each class would meet with a class of a different language major every week. During each joint class, the students of both classes gave oral presentations in their language

of study on their answers to the research questions given to them by the other class, followed by translation into Japanese. The Spanish class had also prepared PowerPoint presentations to accompany their oral presentations. After the presentations, the teachers each gave a short presentation in their language, on a subject of mutual interest and relevance agreed in advance. These talks were also translated into Japanese by a student from the teacher's class. For example, the Spanish-English class teachers talked about regional identities, which was a salient issue for both teachers personally.

### **Final conference**

At the end of the third joint class, questionnaires were distributed to all the students to elicit their opinions about the experiment. One shortcoming that was raised through these questionnaires was the problem of consecutive translation into Japanese, which had proved very time-consuming. Since the students were to work on producing a single presentation, in which they would deepen their research or explore it from a different angle, it was in their interests to find a way to deliver their presentations in two languages as effectively as possible. The solution was to deliver their presentations in the target language using PowerPoint on which they would include Japanese subtitles.

The final student conference took place at the end of the semester, when it was scheduled to cover a lesson period and lunchtime. The schedule was as follows:

10:30: Introduction. Teachers and students from all four departments met in a large lecture hall. The

teachers welcomed the students (each teacher speaking first in another European language, then in his/her native language) and explained the procedure for the presentations.

10:50: PowerPoint presentations. Computers and projectors were set up in each of the four classrooms. Students, who had been divided into mixed groups, went from class to class. In their own classroom, the students in the mixed group were the presenters; in the other three classrooms, they were members of the audience. After listening to the 15-minute presentations in the target language with Japanese subtitles, the audience was invited to ask questions or make comments, which they did in Japanese.

12:10: Party. After the presentations, all the students and teachers congregated again in the lecture hall where we had lunch together. The teachers and some students had brought in food and drinks, so that everybody could enjoy the food cultures of Germany, France, Spain, and the UK.

### Student feedback

Following the final conference, students were again asked to fill in questionnaires giving their opinions on the event and what they thought they had gained from the experience.

The opinions expressed in these questionnaires were very positive, all of the students commenting favorably on the project as something new and fresh that gave them opportunities to mix with students from other departments,

with whom they would normally have only limited contact. Although the enjoyment and novelty of mixing with other students was most prominent, students also noted that they had worked hard on researching and preparing the presentations and felt that their language ability had improved.

The following quotes are representative of the comments made by the students:

#### *“I could widen my horizon”*

Most students commented that the project gave them the chance to learn more about a country whose language they were studying, as well as about other European countries. Since 3rd- and 4th-year students specialize in one of three areas, linguistics, area studies, or literature, this was a rare opportunity for them to explore their country from the unusual perspective of its membership in the European Union. Thus, they were not only introduced to new countries, but also experienced new ways of looking at those countries (including the country of their target language), and this was regarded as a unique learning experience.

#### *“It gave us the chance to become familiar with the sound of different languages”*

Many students mentioned that they enjoyed listening to both the native speaking teacher and their fellow students speaking a different language. Hearing their peers speaking another language was something that many found impressive.

***“I now have new motivation for language learning”***

Related to the previous comment, many students said that hearing their peers speak so fluently gave them new motivation to make more efforts to improve their own language ability. The experience of presenting in their target language to increasingly large audiences (in-class rehearsals, joint classes, and final conference) was also something that many students rated as motivating and many commented that they were satisfied with their accomplishment.

***“I learned that we have to be careful with stereotypes because they don’t fit with the reality”***

At the beginning of the project, one concern that we had as teachers was to avoid a focus on and exacerbation of stereotyped thinking, although we also wanted the questions and the answers to come from the students as much as possible without the interference from or undue influence of the native speaking teachers. One of the rather unexpected outcomes of the project was that, as students deepened their knowledge of the countries, they themselves became more aware of stereotypes and more anxious to go beyond them to try and understand a more complex reality.

***“I now have an idea of the problems of dealing with different languages in the EU”***

As we have already mentioned, one of the issues that we teachers had struggled with in the design phase of the project was the problem of which language to use. Language policy was one of the categories of questions that the students had found interesting, but in addition, the practical problem of

deciding how to communicate with the different classes implicitly paralleled the contentious issue of language use in official meetings of the European Union.

### Teacher opinions

In addition to eliciting student feedback, we teachers also wrote about our impressions of the project, and in particular, about the use of Japanese and the target language.

For all of us, the deliberate use of Japanese in this manner was contrary to the way we normally conducted our classes. The French teacher gave voice to the doubts that all of us, including the students, felt about the appropriateness of this decision: “Using Japanese gives a slightly strange impression. To some extent, it could be said that it’s not really a language class at all. But this was the only way fluid communication could be achieved between different language groups.”

The English teacher also wondered about the use of Japanese, and similarly concluded that it was necessary for solving the problem of mutual communication. She went on to elaborate: “Mutual comprehension wasn’t the only factor; there was also the problem of time. The students’ idea to use subtitles instead of consecutive/ simultaneous translation for the conference was a creative solution that was really effective in this situation.” The students’ involvement in the decision-making process of how best to conduct these classes, striking a balance between effective communication of content and a performance or exhibition of their language skills, was a tribute to the success of the project as a whole.

The decision to conduct bilingual presentations was a compromise, constrained as we were by the assumed purpose of the Communication Practice classes, by the language abilities of the students, and by time. As the German teacher commented: “To organize a multilingual conference would need a lot more preparation and would perhaps be more complicated on the language level. Also the technical facilities are probably not as sophisticated as those in the EU meetings.”

Nevertheless, the experimental nature of the project and the fact that we did not anticipate from the beginning the direction that this project would ultimately take was something that we all felt was beneficial and gratifying to teachers and students alike. As the Spanish teacher said: “[the project] kept our minds open to the needs which were emerging and made possible close cooperation between students and teachers.”

The Spanish teacher also voiced an opinion that was shared by all the teachers about what we felt was the most beneficial aspect of the project: “Students could act as “experts” in the language and country of their study, collecting information and presenting it to their colleagues from other departments. . . . They had to act, in some ways, as “ambassadors” of the study country. This helped them learn new things about the country or see things they already knew from a different, external perspective.”

Summing up these reflections, the project brought to the fore a number of issues that we would not under ordinary circumstances of teaching have thought to question. Formulated as dilemmas, these issues include:

- The class goal of practicing the target language versus the need to communicate information to non-speakers of the target language.
- The benefit of translation and interpretation versus the constraints of time available for presentation and interaction between students and teachers in joint classes.
- Management decisions made by teachers versus management decisions made by students.
- Native-speaking teachers as experts on the country versus students as experts or ambassadors.

## Discussion

Using Japanese deliberately and extensively in classes that are intended for Communication Practice challenged our assumptions of what is appropriate for such classes. Through the experience of the European project, which involved bilingual joint classes and a student conference, we discovered that using Japanese was beneficial for both motivation and target language learning.

One of the principle tenets of CLT, as we have seen in Krashen’s monitor hypothesis (1978; 1983), is that language learning occurs not through conscious attention to form, but rather through meaningful interaction. In this project, however, although students did interact with the target language to the extent that they researched and synthesized information from the internet, through textual sources, or through consultation with the native teachers as informants, their presentation content was meaningful to the other

classes only when translated into Japanese. The use of the target language was for display or exhibition purposes only. Nevertheless, as the students observed, this was an experience that facilitated and provided motivation for language learning.

Moreover, since one of the main purposes of the European project was to exchange information about the countries between the students of the different language departments, the use of Japanese was essential, and this provided extensive opportunities for translation and interpretation, skills which are arguably more important for Japanese students than oral or written output of their own.

Although CLT claims to be learner-centered, prioritizing students' needs and providing them with real tasks to stimulate communication and learning, the type of activity in which these students were engaged—researching information in the target language, then communicating that information to a Japanese audience—is actually more in line with the kind of situation students are more likely to encounter after graduation in the real world of work in Japan. To this extent, in keeping with Hiep's (2007) call to maintain the tenets of CLT while addressing local contextual issues, this project provided a real communicative learning event.

As is clear from the students' comments, one of the main benefits of the project was raised motivation, not only during the project itself, but also in a desire to further improve their language ability subsequently. Not only were students cast in the role of experts in the target country, but their performance as proficient speakers in the language was remarked on by others as most impressive. This relative

expertise had a highly positive effect on the way they saw themselves as learners of the language. In addition, others students' proficiency gave them the stimulus to develop their own.

## Conclusion

Using Japanese, whether through interpreting or translating key ideas for subtitles, was a solution to a practical problem, a solution that both students and teachers felt an investment in solving. Although the project as a whole was conceived and facilitated by the four teachers, the students were granted considerable autonomy in preparing their presentations and ensuring the success of the joint classes and conference. Confronted with a real-life problem of communication, the question of whether or not to use Japanese was discussed and debated, providing us all with an additional, though unexpected, insight into the actual experience of actual language issues faced by the member countries of the European Union.

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**Marimar Jorge** moved from Tokyo University of Foreign Studies to Seisen University last year. She is interested in research on the Spanish Contemporary Novel, and how to teach Spanish Literature to foreign students.

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