

# Using the L1 in the L2 classroom: The students speak

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The goal of this study was to elucidate how students' preferences regarding their first language use (L1, or Japanese) in the second language (L2, or English) class varied with proficiency. Participants were 305 first- and second-year students in English-language courses in International Studies and Information Technology departments in a Japanese university. Research questions: 1) Did desires for L1 support vary with proficiency ("Proficiency Effect"); did proficiency levels influence when L1 support was 2) desirable; and 3) undesirable? Participants selected yes/no or multiple choice answers in an anonymous questionnaire. Agreement percentages, classified by participants' scores on the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) into five proficiency levels, were analysed using Excel. Results revealed two Proficiency Effect patterns, influencing when L1 support was most and least desired in varying classroom situations. Participants preferred more instructive than affective L1 support. Recommendations for educators and future research were suggested.

本論の目的は、第2言語（L2または英語）授業における第1言語（L1または日本語）使用に関して、学生のL2習熟度に応じて、学生の希望がどのように変化するかを把握することにある。本研究は、日本の大学で国際学部および情報科学部に在籍する、1・2年生305名を被験者として行った。リサーチ・クエスチョンは、以下の通りである。(1)L1サポートに対する希望の強さは、学生の習熟度に応じて変化するのか（「習熟度効果」の有無）、(2)・(3)学生の習熟度レベルは、どういった状況でL1サポートが望ましいのか、または望ましくないのかを左右するのか。前述の学生は、無記名方式のアンケートにおいて、「はいいいえ」を選択、または多岐選択方式で回答した。質問に同意した学生の割合を、学生のTOEICスコアに応じて5段階の習熟度に振分け、Excelを用いて分析した。調査結果は、2通りの習熟度効果の存在を示唆した。これらの効果は、英語授業における様々な状況で、L1サポートが最大限および最小限に必要とされるか否かに影響を及ぼしていた。情意のL1サポートと教室内の指示に関するL1サポートを比べた場合、本論の被験者は後者に関してより多くのL1サポートを希望していた。英語教育者向けにいくつかの提言を行い、今後の研究計画についても言及した。

This study focuses on evaluating using the first language (L1) in the foreign language (L2) classroom in a largely monolingual country (Japan). The languages in this study are Japanese (L1) and English (L2). We will use a questionnaire to assess participants' views on whether they desire the L1's use during instruction, and whether opinions differ with L2 proficiency, measured using TOEIC scores, which will be termed the "Proficiency Effect." This study will attempt to expand beyond former studies by clarifying preference patterns for support, and introducing a useful term to describe these patterns, as they emerge with the use of TOEIC scores to differentiate proficiency levels. Suggested practical applications could interest teachers following changes in educational policy.

## Literature Review

### *Mismatched Principles: Institutions and Teachers*

Policies regarding L1 use in the L2 classrooms began with the direct method (Harbord, 1992) and evolved alongside socio-political developments (Auerbach, 1993). In 1961, five basic tenets for L2-only use in the L2 classroom were promulgated during a conference in Mekare University, with the first tenet being that English is best taught monolingually (Phillipson, 1992). These tenets have likely influenced changes in

education policy in Japan (Honma, 2005; Hughes, 2005; Frederick, 2011).

Monolingual instruction has been used to maximize students' exposure to, and use of, the L2, and even to "push" students with incomprehensible input. Unfortunately, it encourages an asymmetrical teacher-student relationship, and smacks of linguistic imperialism (Yonesaka, 2005). Among literature comparing views of teacher beliefs, in none have the majority favored excluding the students' L1 (Macaro, 2001).

Stephens (2006) states that Japanese institutions prefer monolingual English instruction for pedagogical reasons, which are based on unsound assumptions, as critiqued by Auerbach (1993). If data explored in the present paper support their allegations, then monolingual instruction is unnecessary and potentially detrimental in countries like Japan, where the L1 is dominant.

### *EFL context and Japan*

Many Japanese students take compulsory English courses, but perceive no practical need for the L2. For these students, using the L2 exclusively in the classroom could not only lower motivation and morale, but also invite feelings of rejection, alienation and denigration of their own language and culture (Auerbach, 1993; Schweers, 1999). Auerbach and Schweers posit that this mindset has been observed in the ESL classroom of immigrants living in the L2 culture, and might apply to EFL students living in the L1 culture. While a colonial bias might not apply to English teaching in Japan, because Japanese enjoys a higher status (Barker, 2003; Stephens, 2006), students might still resent the exclusion of their L1.

### *L1 as a tool*

The L1 can be used in the L2 classroom as a tool to reduce affective filters (Meyer, 2008; Norman, 2008). Norman (2008) states "Students are often unresponsive, inattentive, and unwilling to speak in class" (p. 692). However, he observes that the opposite was true when he occasionally used the L1 in class with the same students. Often, students will not speak out of fear of embarrassment (Nation, 2003; Meyer, 2008).

Furthermore, if students want their teachers to use the L1 but the teachers do not perceive or respond to this need, it can lead to an unhappy classroom experience for all (Burden, 2001).

Careful use of the L1 can assist students to make higher cognitive adjustments while learning a language. Used effectively, the L1 can be a facilitating, and not just an interfering factor, to overcome the assumptions created by the first language (Yamamoto-Wilson, 1997). Furthermore, if instructors know both the L1 and L2 languages, they can recognize, anticipate and correct the L1 assumptions by comparing the two languages (Barker, 2003; Nation, 2003; Brown, 2009).

Although a potentially useful tool, how the L1 is used determines whether it is detrimental or helpful (Stephens, 2006). This depends on the goals, type of language, materials, method and procedures used in the classroom (Weschler, 1997; Yonesaka & Metoki, 2007). Unlike the nearly universal success individuals have in learning their L1, attempts to learn the L2 can fail for many reasons, such as the inability of teachers to make meaningful connections between the L2 and the L1 (Yamamoto-Wilson, 1997; Nation, 2003; Norman, 2008). With sufficient exposure to the L2, the L1 can be used to clarify the differences between the L1 and L2, when accuracy is important and time is limited (Ozaki, 2011). There is no perfect balance or model for using the L1, but instead usage should be flexible and adapted to students' needs at appropriate times and ways (Atkinson, 1993; Weschler, 1997; Nation, 2003; Norman, 2008).

While reviewing the literature, two EFL studies emerged as useful comparatives for the present research (Schweers, 1999; Norman, 2008). In both studies, participants were studying compulsory English courses while living in their native environments. In the first study, students' and teachers' views concerning a variety of classroom situations were compared. In the second study, students' views alone were compared between proficiency levels, but the variety of classroom situations was not considered. The present study attempts to combine the issues of both studies while advancing into new territory using TOEIC classification.

**Schweers (1999): Students and teachers**

In a study with university students and teachers in Puerto Rico, Schweers (1999), investigated the desired use of L1 (Spanish) in the L2 (English) classroom. While all teachers felt the L1 should be used occasionally, some students felt it should not. Schweers (1999) reported that students and teachers wanted more use of the L1 to aid comprehension, particularly of new vocabulary and difficult concepts. Few students and teachers felt that the L1 was appropriate when summarizing material already covered. Regarding cultural and morale support, fewer students than teachers felt the use of L1 was appropriate. Conversely, Schweers reported that more students than teachers felt that the L1 might help students feel more comfortable and confident in the classroom. During small-group work, both students and teachers agreed that the L1 was not helpful. We feel that differences might be explained in part by the fact that this study took place in classes where teachers, who might not share the students' L1, preferred monolingual instruction, and by the difficulty of explaining problematic concepts in what might have been the teachers' own L2—especially where using incorrect words might compound the confusion. Moreover, Schweers studied unranked students in rudimentary English university classes. Responses could have been different if the questionnaire measured varying levels of English competency.

**Norman (2008): Students**

In a study with university students in Japan, Norman (2008) included student competency as a factor when evaluating using the L1 (Japanese) in the L2 (English) classroom. Participants included two non-English-major groups of first-year students from different universities, studying Human Health Sciences and Rehabilitation, and a third group of advanced third- and fourth-year English major students who had studied overseas. In responses, all students preferred some use of L1 in the L2 classroom. Students at the beginner levels preferred more, while advanced level students preferred less L1 use. Most beginners, compared with few advanced students, preferred that the teacher know the L1, while many among the advanced students preferred that the instructor not know the

L1 at all. Perhaps, already having experienced an all-English environment, they were more comfortable with that situation in the classroom. Norman found no correlation between varying levels of student proficiency within groups and their preference for L1 use, while there was a significant difference between groups. In open-ended responses, students reported that L1 use helped them to understand the content and explanations used in the classroom. They could ask questions in the L1, the teacher could explain common mistakes L2 learners used in the L1, they had a good perception of and relationship with the teacher, and they felt that the class proceeded smoothly. The disadvantages were that they could become lazy and not try to learn the L2, they lost the chance to hear the L2 used by the English teacher, and their listening ability would not improve much (Norman, 2008).

**Problem**

We feel that, while Norman addressed factors not assessed in Schweers' study, his results were limited to the three distinct groups he analysed, and did not address pedagogical considerations raised in Schweers' study. Teachers need a practical way to assess students and suggestions of appropriate teaching methods for each level. This study will address the following:

- Do definite patterns of students' preferences for L1 support exist that vary with their proficiency ("Proficiency Effect")?
- Do proficiency levels influence the types of L1 support students prefer?
- Do proficiency levels influence the types of L1 support students do not prefer?

**Method****Participants**

Volunteers were 305 university first- and second-year students in a public Japanese university, enrolled in International Studies and Information Technology English language courses.

**Questionnaire**

An anonymous bilingual questionnaire was adapted from Schweers' questionnaire (1999). Two questions were added: Question 1, "Where

does your latest TOEIC score stand in the following scale?”, was included to assess English proficiency to test Norman’s findings regarding differing English proficiency levels (Norman, 2008). Question 2, “Should the instructor know the L1?”, was added following its use in Burden (2001) and Norman (2008). This question was added to check whether student responses changed according to their L2 proficiency levels, as measured by TOEIC scores rather than the year of the class they were in or whether they had overseas English experience.

**Procedure**

Instructors distributed questionnaires to students in class. Participation was voluntary and required about 10 minutes. Participants were asked for their most recent TOEIC score in Question 1 (N=305). Questionnaires were sorted into five groups based on their TOEIC scores: Beginners, Group 1=<299, n=63; High beginners, Group 2=300-399, n=96; Intermediates, Group 3=400-599, n=110; High intermediates, Group 4=600-799, n=30; and Advanced, Group 5=>800, n=6. We felt that these TOEIC ranges reflect reasonable in-class proficiency levels as observed from years of classroom experience.

**Analysis**

The questionnaire included nine yes/no and multiple-choice questions. Scores were analysed in percentages using Excel, and agreement percentages for each question were tabulated.

**Results**

Results in the figures indicate the question number and answer option letters in the legends. Full size images are available in the online version of this article.

**Students’ desired use of L1**

Most students preferred that instructors know the L1. Group 1 expressed the highest desire, followed in decreasing increments to Group 5. Regarding whether or not the L1 should be used in the L2 classroom, students generally felt that it should, but agreement declined with increasing L2 proficiency. Concerning whether students would like their instructors to use the L1 in

the classroom, beginners favored the use of L1, decreasing to Group 5 (see Figure 1).

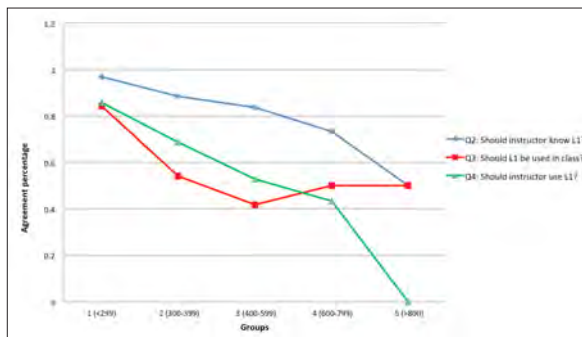


Figure 1. Students’ desired use of L1

Regarding the specific use of the L1 in the classroom, students chose only those variables that they agreed should be used. These results are reported in terms of Instruction: High L1 desire, and Classroom Management and Affect: Low L1 desire.

**Instruction: High L1 desire**

Most students believed that the L1 should be used to explain difficult concepts, with agreement declining with increasing proficiency. For explaining the relationship between English and Japanese, about half of the students felt that L1 was useful, although few in Group 5 agreed that the L1 was useful. About half believed that it should be used to check for comprehension in all groups except participants in Group 5, who believed it should not be used. Among students who wanted instructors to define new vocabulary items in the L1, the lowest proficiency students wanted the most L1 support (see Figure 2).

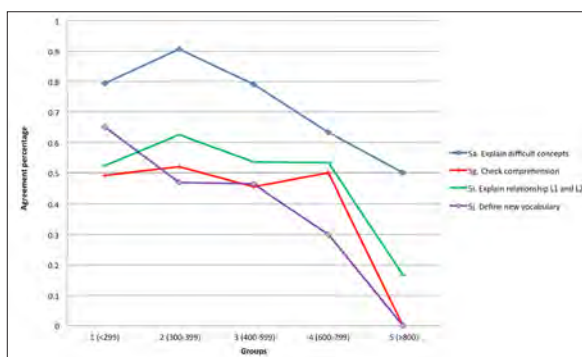


Figure 2. Instruction: Proficiency and high desire for L1 use

### Emotional support and classroom management: Low L1 desire

When considering these scores, as the responsibility for classroom experience moves away from instruction and more towards general classroom experience, students prefer less L1 support. With scores generally decreasing from Group 1 to Group 5, students felt that it was not important for the instructor to use the L1 to test, joke around with students, or to help students feel more comfortable and confident (see Figure 3).

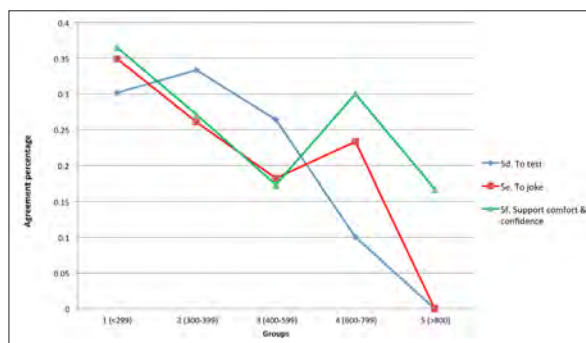


Figure 3. Proficiency: Low L1 desire and emotional support

Across all groups, few students believed that the L1 should be used to introduce new material, to summarize material already covered, during tests, or to carry out small-group work (see Figure 4). In Figure 4, a second Proficiency Effect pattern was observed. A U-shaped pattern appeared; advanced students in Group 5 actually preferred more L1 support than beginners, although still at low levels of agreement. This second pattern may reflect an increase in anxiety felt by advanced students as they worked with more difficult materials and in groups.

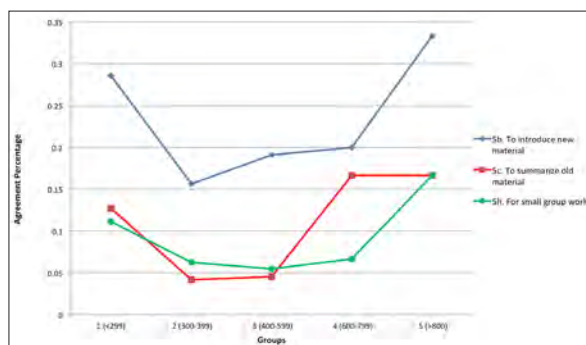


Figure 4. Proficiency: Low L1 desire and classroom management

### Students' views

As students' abilities and confidence rose, their perceived need for Japanese support decreased.

Students were asked what percentage of the time they thought Japanese should be used in the English-language classroom (Q6). The majority of all groups preferred L1 to be used in the classroom less than 40% of the time, and this decreased with proficiency.

Regarding how often Japanese should be used in the English classroom to aid comprehension (Q7), the spread of scores reflected student English ability. "Rarely" was chosen in increasing amounts (5% to 50%) and "Sometimes" was chosen in decreasing amounts as proficiency increased (59% to 33%).

Students chose one or more of three possible reasons they preferred the use of Japanese in their classroom (Q8). From Group 1 to Group 5, most students chose "I feel less lost" (83% to 57%). Fewer students preferred Japanese to be used to help them feel more comfortable (5% to 17%), or to feel less tense (13% to 0%).

Students generally felt that using the L1 in the L2 classroom would help them to learn English (Q9). Proficiency patterns emerged when similar-ranging options were combined. "No" and "A little" increased (27% to 67%) while "Fairly much" and "A lot" decreased (71% to 34%) from Group 1 to Group 5.

### Discussion

#### Proficiency effect

Two patterns emerged. A decreasing slope was observed with high agreement among students' desires for L1 use in the classroom (see Figure 1), when helping students construct complex cognitive connections between the L1 and L2 (see Figure 2), and with low agreement scores for students' desires for L1 emotional support and testing (see Figure 3), the frequency and percentage of L1 use desired by students, and in feeling that the L1 helped students learn the L2. A U-shaped pattern was observed at low agreement percentages when introducing and reviewing material and in small group work (see Figure 4). Since agreement percentages were low for the U-shaped pattern across all five groups, we feel that students generally did not desire

L1 support for these factors. We focused on the factors uncovered by the first pattern.

Results generally support Schweers' (1999) findings, but a strong Proficiency Effect was discovered which Schweers' study does not address. A Proficiency Effect can also be observed between groups in Norman's (2008) study. While most students believed that instructors should know the L1, their desire for teachers to use the L1 in class was lower and declined with increasing L2 ability. Students do not necessarily need to hear the L1 in class to benefit from instructors' knowledge of it.

Regarding instructive use of L1, beginner students hope to rely on L1 support in class more than advanced students. This pattern can be seen with explaining difficult concepts in class and defining new words, both of which showed a strong Proficiency Effect which was not uncovered in Schweers' study but supports Norman's (2008) findings. Students hoped for the L1's use in explaining the relationship between Japanese and English and checking comprehension, but this desire dropped by Group 5.

Schweers (1999) and Auerbach (1993) focused on affective uses of L1 to assist in the less instructive aspects of classroom activities. We found a higher reported need for L1 use among the beginners than the advanced students regarding confidence, banter between students and instructors, and use during tests. Generally, all students preferred less L1 support in affective and testing areas than in the more instructive classroom situations. We observed a U-shaped pattern where advanced students showed a higher need for L1 support for confidence and when reviewing and introducing material (an instruction aspect), than even the beginners. Advanced students feel more vulnerable in these areas than beginners because they take more risks; their material is more difficult. In both cases, our affective results were more pronounced than in Schweers (1999).

### *Limitations and future research*

The standard TOEIC test measures students' listening and reading ability but not speaking and writing ability, yet proficiency cannot be limited to listening and reading, and the "New TOEIC" test still contains serious limitations (Chapman & Newfields, 2008). Nevertheless, TOEIC scores are

extensively used in the education system in Japan to provide an initial assessment of language proficiency. Others can easily understand, apply, and test these results. It would be beneficial to determine proficiency levels using tests targeting the productive aspects of language, such as the special TOEIC Writing and Speaking tests, EIKEN or TOEFL, in future studies.

A second limitation of this study is the uneven number of participants in each group. This was unavoidable. Conversely, it reflects a spread of English abilities that could occur in any classroom. We feel that the large number of participants was enough to show learning preference patterns among students. Future studies could attempt to standardize the number of participants within proficiency levels.

A third limitation regarded the simplicity of analysis. The use of more rigorous statistical methods might provide more reliable and significant findings. However, we chose to use the simpler percentage analysis to make these findings easier to compare with similar studies.

A final limitation of this study was the research design's simplicity. The unique factor observed was student proficiency levels, overlooking many factors that might have skewed the findings, such as overseas travel or exposure to English-language media. While we observed that students' preferences in the classroom changed with their proficiency, a more rigorous analysis should provide results that are more valid.

### **Conclusions**

Patterns have emerged which could help to determine the most effective use of L1 in the L2 classroom. There appears to be a need for L1 support at the beginner levels. Factors that decline with increasing proficiency include emotional support, perceived desire for L1 support, and testing. Beginner students prefer knowing that they can rely on L1 support to actually needing to hear it. The quickest way for students to make cognitive additions of the L2 is to connect the L2 to the L1. Teachers can assist students when comparing L1 and L2 linguistic rules, teaching new vocabulary, and checking comprehension. Regarding testing, most students did not perceive a need for L1 support, and this declined with proficiency levels; advanced

students saw no need at all for L1 support. L1 support for testing could be used in test preparation for beginners and intermediates, but not appear in the tests themselves. Factors having a low and U-shaped relationship with proficiency levels included introducing and reviewing material and small group work; students did not feel these factors were important. Allowing for an increase in L1 use between students when working with old or new material or in groups could help promote production of the L2.

Ideally, instructors highly proficient in Japanese should instruct lower-level students while instructors highly proficient in English should instruct the higher-level students. Preferably, all instructors should have some knowledge of the L1. While L2 use should be maximized, occasional strategic use of the L1 would be beneficial. Students need exposure to the L2 first, but the L1 can assist when L2 examples and explanations cannot alleviate confusion. L1 support could benefit lower-level students during test preparation, but not appear in the tests. Lower level students should have access to bilingual texts that include L2–L1 definitions and L1 explanations of L2 grammar and usage. The use of L1 should not be punished, and the use of L2 encouraged.

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## Speakers at JALT2012

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Even a brief look at the biographies of the plenary speakers suggests that among them, they have worked in, taught in, lived in, or been to a large percentage of all the countries in the world.

### Alan Firth

... Senior Lecturer in Applied Linguistics at Newcastle University, is based in the UK but has previously worked in Denmark, Hawaii and Australia. His travels have certainly been formative in his interest in English as a Lingua Franca. It is the combination of this interest with his authoritative knowledge of pragmatics which has led him to focus on the way interactions take place in situations outside the classroom. In his talk at JALT, Alan will discuss the implications for classroom instruction of L2 learning through Skypecasting in internet chat rooms.



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- Theories and decision making. *The Modern Language Journal*, 85(4), 531-548.
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**Hidenori Kashihara** is a professional translator and a part-time English lecturer at Hiroshima City University. He is interested in the use of L1 in the L2 classroom, theory and practice in English-to-Japanese translation, and students' motivation in learning English. He may be contacted at <salivan@bronze.ocn.ne.jp>.

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## Speakers at JALT2012

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### Suresh Canagarajah

... speaking on Sunday morning, brings his personal experience to the speaker's podium. Originally from Sri Lanka but now based in the US, he is the Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of Applied Linguistics at The Pennsylvania State University. Suresh has extensively researched (and personally experienced) the use of English in multi-lingual and multicultural contexts. His work in identity among diaspora language speakers has led him around the world looking at how English is used in these contexts. He is author of a number of books and journals, including *Resisting Linguistic Imperialism*, a landmark book which investigates the use of Englishes in periphery communities.



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