

Promoting L2 Use as a Means of Facilitating TBLT in Japanese Classrooms

Robert Lowe

Rikkyo University

There is increasing discussion about the suitability of Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) in Japanese classrooms. While some advocate TBLT as the most effective way to increase learners' communicative competence, the tendency of Japanese students to remain silent or to excessively use their L1 may be a barrier to the effectiveness of the approach. This paper focuses on the use of L1 in English classes, and surveys the ways in which it is used by students during tasks. It is then demonstrated, using peer monitoring as an example, that simple classroom interventions can effectively encourage L2 use during tasks and thus facilitate TBLT approaches.

日本では英語教育におけるTask-based Language Teaching (TBLT)の適合性が、ますます議論されている。TBLTは英語コミュニケーションスキルの習得に最も効果のある方法だと言う言語学者もいるが、日本の学生は全く発言しなかったり、第1言語を使い過ぎたりする傾向があり、それがTBLTの有効性を妨げがちである。本論では、英語の授業でTBLTを用いた場合、日本の学生がどのように第1言語を使うか調査する。次に、peer monitoringを教授法の一例として使い、この簡単な方法が第2言語の使用量を増加させ、それによってTBLTのアプローチをより効果的に促進することを論証する。

Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) has been growing in popularity among ELT practitioners in Japan. Nunan (1989) defines a task as “a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form” (p. 10). Feez (1998), similarly notes that in a classroom task, the focus should be on “process rather than product” (p. 17). For task-based approaches to be successful then, the students' L2 should be the primary mode of communication during the task, allowing them to improve their communicative competence by engaging in meaning-focused L2 discussions. Richards and Rodgers (2001) note that language learning is best accomplished when students are immersed in tasks which engage them in “naturalistic and meaningful communication” (p. 224), again implying that during tasks, students optimally benefit by communicating in their L2.

While TBLT has been gaining popularity in Japan, it has recently been subject to criticism by some in the ELT community, who argue that it is an inappropriate methodology due to the classroom habits and approaches to learning taken by Japanese students. There are two classroom phenomena in Japan which may act against the successful application of TBLT approaches: classroom silence (Harumi, 2011) and excessive L1 use. While silence is an important concern regarding the application of TBLT, this paper will focus primarily on the problem of L1 overuse by students. Sato (2010) argues that “English is not the primary medium in the Japanese English classroom” and that Japanese students tend to “overuse their shared mother tongue in pair or group work” (p. 194). This would seem to run counter to TBLT approaches which, to operate effectively, require substantial L2 use during tasks. Although Sato is discussing high school students, his observations about L1 preference are borne out at the university level by the work of Carson and Kashiwara (2012), who found that while students with high proficiency were more open to L1-only instruction, a decline in proficiency roughly correlated with a preference for instructor L1 use. Carson and Kashiwara's paper does not focus specifically on student L1 use; however, it demonstrates that at lower proficiency levels,

preference for L1 remains high among university students. In addition, Satake (2011) found high levels of L1 use among Japanese university students during designated English-only discussions, adding further support to this notion.

There are several possible reasons for excessive use of L1 by students, both intrinsic and extrinsic. The approach to learning taken by Japanese students may be one reason. Cave (2003) notes that the Japanese high school education system is geared towards “inculcating knowledge for the sake of examinations that test the recall of facts and standard theories, or else the ability to mechanically manipulate formulae” (p. 87), placing it at odds with TBLT approaches, which have a strong focus on meaning rather than form. Sato (2010) claims many Japanese high school students “have test-related motivation, rather than communication-related motivation” (p. 193), providing another extrinsic explanation for student L1 use. Intrinsically, psychological effects could factor into overreliance on L1. Students may not wish to stand out in the class (Cutrone, 2009), or may be reticent to use their L2 for reasons of shyness, or due to a lack of confidence in their own language skills (Harumi, 2011).

These problems have been noted before, and a number of solutions have been proposed to tackle them. Many argue for the strategic employment of L1 to aid comprehension (Birch, 2010), while others recommend L1 reduction strategies. Hancock (1997) and Satake (2011) encourage awareness-raising activities, in which the students are made aware of their own level of L1 use in order to encourage a voluntary L1 reduction among learners. In this paper, I will explore a different approach to reducing L1 use with the introduction of peer-monitors.

Rationale and Methodology

In order for TBLT approaches to be fully effective, it is important to find ways of promoting L2 use during tasks. To investigate this situation an experiment was designed in order to discover two things: when and how Japanese students use their L1 in lessons, and whether it is possible to promote L2 in these situations. The experiment was divided into three stages:

- Firstly, 140 volunteers were found of roughly pre-intermediate level. These students were all majoring in English communication at a private university, and were taking a required course in which they were given topic-based tests every two weeks. These

were second-year students, who had already completed the first year “Intensive English” course. The second year course was termed “Advanced Intensive English,” reflecting its relationship to the previous course, rather than the level of learner proficiency. The students had been instructed by both their Japanese professors and their English instructors to speak only English in class.

- Secondly, short, anonymous questionnaires (adapted from Lowe, 2011) were given to the volunteers. These questionnaires contained two questions about the amount and nature of the students’ use of English and Japanese in lessons (see Appendix A).
- Finally, classroom recordings were made of six groups of students completing tasks during lessons. The recordings were made through the use of a small microphone feeding into a digital recorder, placed in the center of each group. Three of the groups were “trial groups” containing “peer-monitors” - students whose job it was to monitor the levels of English and Japanese being used by their fellow students during the lessons. These monitors were chosen at random, and in an ongoing experiment would be switched each lesson. The monitors were engaged in the task with the other students, and were given the manageable task of simply noting down which student, in their estimation, was using the most English. The other three groups were not subject to this intervention, and acted as the “control groups.” If the levels of English and Japanese were significantly affected by the presence of the peer-monitors, this would point to the effectiveness of the intervention. While it is possible that the presence of microphones may have affected the language the students were using, the fact that microphones were present in all the classes would have caused this effect to occur in both the control and the trial groups, and so would not have detracted from any impact caused by the peer-monitoring intervention. The classroom instructions were given in English, but understanding was assured through the extensive use of information-checking questions.

If the responses to the questionnaires indicated that the students were heavily relying on their L1 in the classroom, and were mainly using it for discussion of classroom activities and instructions, this would add strength to the idea that

TBLT may have a limited application in Japanese English lessons. As a major focus of TBLT is on using the L2 during tasks, a high rate of L1 use during this phase of the lesson would undermine the effectiveness of the approach. However, if the peer monitoring had a noticeable effect on the amount of English used in these discussions, it would point towards the idea that certain techniques could be employed by the teacher in order to promote L2 discussion, and thus help to facilitate TBLT.

Research Stage I: Questionnaires

The questionnaires were intended to discover when and why students used their L1 in lessons. For each question, the students were asked to select three answers, from (1) to (3) in order of importance. This was preliminary research, designed to find either confirming or disconfirming evidence that Japanese students use their L1 more during tasks than would be desirable for developing communicative competence. The information collected from the questionnaires would also provide a sharper focus for the classroom investigation in the second research stage. The questionnaire was designed to find two main pieces of information: how much L1 and L2 the students were speaking during their lessons, and the nature of their L1 use.

- The questionnaire was handed to approximately 140 students.
- 106 were returned, of which 15 were filled in incorrectly or incompletely, and so were discounted.
- This left a useable response rate of 91 / 140 or 65%.

The percentage results for the two questions are presented in the following tables:

Table 1. In your Advanced Intensive English classes, how much Japanese and how much English do you speak?

| | |
|--|-----|
| Only Japanese | 0% |
| Mostly Japanese, with a little English | 28% |
| Half English and half Japanese | 57% |
| Mostly English, with a little Japanese | 12% |
| Only English | 3% |

Table 2. When you speak in Japanese, what do you talk about?

| | |
|--|----------|
| The work you are doing | 81 (89%) |
| The instructions the teacher has given | 66 (72%) |
| Part time job | 33 (36%) |
| Other classes | 17 (19%) |
| Social life | 39 (43%) |
| Gossip | 29 (32%) |
| Other | 8 (9%) |

The results shown in Table 1 appear to confirm the hypothesis outlined earlier that Japanese students are likely to use a significant amount of L1 in their language lessons. While the majority of students selected the option "half English and half Japanese," it should be noted that far more students claimed to be speaking mostly Japanese than claimed to be speaking mostly English. This indicates a greater overall use of Japanese in the classroom than English.

As can be seen from Table 2, the majority of students claimed to be using their L1 to discuss two main subjects: the work they were doing, and the instructions the teacher had given. These discussions were unlikely to be due to confusion over tasks, as the instructions were extensively information-checked for understanding, and the tasks were designed appropriately for the students' level. While social life, gossip, and jobs were also evidently being discussed, it is worth noting that these were usually the second or third choices (i.e., less important, or less frequently discussed subjects). Importantly, the first two options were chosen together by a considerable number of the students, indicating that most students, during tasks, would carry out the majority of their genuine communicative discussions in L1 rather than L2. While this would suggest that the students use English frequently during lessons, the percentage of English use was lower than would be hoped if TBLT approaches are to be effectively utilized. This overuse of L1 is likely to reduce the beneficial effects of genuine communicative L2 use, which is the focus of TBLT.

Research Stage 2: Peer Monitors and Classroom Recordings

In the second stage of the research, six groups of pre-intermediate level undergraduate students were recorded engaging in a task. Three of the groups were trial groups that included peer monitors, and three were control groups without monitors. In the trial groups, one student was told at the beginning of the lesson to listen to the language used by their friends, and make a mental note of who was using the most English during their discussions. This would be revealed at the end of the lesson, though no reward would be given other than praise. This was intended to positively encourage the students to engage in L2 communication, rather than negatively assessing their L1 use. As all the groups recorded were of roughly pre-intermediate level, any changes in their language use can be cautiously attributed to the peer-monitoring intervention.

The recordings reveal that there was a clear difference between the language use of the trial and the control groups. The amount of English and Japanese used by the students in each class was timed, and the percentage given is an approximate percentage of the total spoken interaction. The overall percentages can be seen in the table below.

The trial groups engaged in more extensive and in-depth use of the L2 during task transaction than the control groups, who evidently tended towards L1 use. This is consistent with the results found in the questionnaires as discussed earlier, and also seems to indicate that the peer-monitoring intervention facilitated a more effective application of the TBLT approach.

Three examples from the recordings will be used to demonstrate the kinds of discussion taking place in the trial groups. All the transcripts are taken from the same point in the lesson, were made by the author, and were crosschecked by a colleague. The students had been asked to think of some celebrity gossip, and write a short paragraph in a style consistent with the gossip columns they had read earlier in the lesson. I will

not provide transcripts from the control groups, but it is important to note that at the same point in those lessons, the students were engaged in predominantly L1 discussion.

Transcript 1: Trial Group A

S1: Mona (2) Yamamoto Mona (2) illicit (1) illicit love
 S2: What's illicit love? (S1 shows S2 her dictionary) Oh! No!
 S1: But she married new person now (students gasp)
 S3: Oh (1) really?
 S1: Yes
 S2: She is very (2) scary (Laughter)
 S1: Scary (Inaudible - 15 seconds)
 S1: What happened?
 S3: Smoking (3) long time ago
 S2: Long time ago (2) I know
 S3: I know
 S1: I don't know
 S3: You are not Japanese
 S1: I'm native!
 S2: Where do you live?
 S1: I live in Australia
 S3: You are very (2) liar

We can see in Transcript 1 that the students are using their L2 to carry out the task they have been set, discussing celebrity gossip and trying to remember the details in order to write them down. It is interesting to note that they are engaging each other in their L2 for more general conversational purposes, as can be seen in the jokey exchange at the end of the transcript. This use of the L2 for meaning-focused discussion and genuine communication is an indicator that the peer-monitoring intervention is effectively creating an atmosphere conducive to TBLT

Table 3. Percentage comparison of spoken L1 and L2

| Groups | Trial Groups (Monitors) | | Control Groups (No Monitors) | |
|---------|-------------------------|--------------|------------------------------|--------------|
| | English (%) | Japanese (%) | English (%) | Japanese (%) |
| Group A | 84 | 16 | 29 | 71 |
| Group B | 63 | 37 | 17 | 83 |
| Group C | 87 | 13 | 24 | 76 |

methods. Similar results were achieved in the other trial classes, as can be seen in the following two transcripts:

Transcript 2: Trial Group B

S1: He visit (1) visit[ed
 S2: [her mansion?
 S1: Apart (2) Apartment (2) on Friday
 S3: Paparazzi
 S2: Paparazzi?
 S3: Paparazzi
 S4: He said she's friend.
 S2: Papara[zz
 S1: [paparazzi
 S3: Paparazzi's English?

This class demonstrated the least effective results of the peer monitoring. While they produced a large amount of meaning-focused discussion, a small example of which is provided above, the students were more prone than the other trial groups to make use of L1. Despite this, the class still showed a larger amount of L2 use than the control groups, and as we can see in the vocabulary question at the end of the transcript, some genuine L2 communication is still taking place between the students in the form of negotiated meaning. It should be noted that while all the classes were of roughly pre-intermediate level, this group had a generally lower level of ability than the other groups studied, which may help explain the increased use of L1 in comparison with the other trial groups.

Transcript 3: Trial Group C

T: He was very rude in a meeting with
 the head of Miyagi prefecture
 S1: I think every[...
 S2: [what name?
 S3: What name (2) is he?
 S2: I'm not sur[e]
 S1: [Sato wa!
 S2: I don't [know...
 S3: [no...]
 S4: uh...rude? Rude [(2) say]
 S1: [If you don't have any
 ideas, we don't help [you
 S2: [yeah yeah yeah]
 S1: Like that (4) Is he fool?

S3: uh?
 S1: Is he fool?
 S3: Yes!
 S4: Yes, of course!

Once again, Transcript 3 shows strong evidence of genuine communicative L2 use during the task transaction phase of the lesson. As with the previous examples, they are discussing a particular piece of gossip, and attempting to remember as many details as possible. There is also, in all three of the transcripts presented, evidence of more genuine communication between the students. In this case, one student asks the others for their opinion of the person under discussion ("Is he fool?"). At the same point in the lessons with the control groups, students were discussing almost totally in Japanese, with very little English input, apart from to repeat what they were writing down. This appears to show some interesting evidence that the use of interventions such as peer-monitoring could be a way of facilitating TBLT methods in Japanese English classrooms. While the transcripts provided are necessarily short, and provide only a small snapshot of the events taking place in the lessons, they have been chosen as representative of wider trends present in the classroom recordings.

Conclusion

Previous research has shown that there are particular challenges that will be encountered when importing TBLT methods into English classrooms in Japan, one of which is the tendency for Japanese students to overuse their L1 in lessons, resulting in a large amount of genuine communication being carried out in the L1 rather than the L2. This runs counter to TBLT as a methodology which encourages the use of L2 during tasks as a means of building communicative competence. While this is an obstacle for ELT practitioners in Japan, this paper demonstrates through the example of peer monitoring, that small classroom interventions can function as extrinsic motivating factors, encouraging and promoting L2 use, and thus facilitating TBLT approaches. While peer-monitoring was used to affect these changes, it should be stressed that this is merely one example of an intervention, designed to show that classroom techniques can be used to facilitate TBLT, and it is likely that there are equally effective methods of achieving the same goals. In addition, this experiment

was carried out with roughly pre-intermediate level students, and it would be interesting to see whether the intervention is more or less effective when applied to students with differing levels of skill. Despite the small scale and focused nature of this study, it was demonstrated that a simple classroom intervention can facilitate TBLT through promoting greater use of L2 among students.

References

- Birch, G. (2010). Behind the scenes: An examination of student L1 use. *The Language Teacher*, 34(3), 19-24.
- Carson, E. & Kashihara, H. (2012). Using L1 in the L2 classroom: The students speak. *The Language Teacher*, 36(4), 41-48.
- Cave, P. (2003). Reform prospects in Japanese schools. In R. Goodman & D. Phillips (Eds.), *Can the Japanese change their education system?* (pp. 87-102). Oxford: Symposium Books.
- Cutrone, P. (2009). Overcoming Japanese EFL learners' fear of speaking. *Language Studies Working Papers*, 1, 55-63.
- Feez, S. (1998). *Text based syllabus design*. Sydney: National Centre for English Teaching and Research.
- Hancock, M. (1997). Behind classroom code-switching: Layering and language choice in L2 learner interaction. *TESOL Quarterly*, 31(2), 217-235.
- Harumi, S. (2011). Classroom silence: Voices from Japanese EFL learners. *ELT Journal*, 65(3), 260-269.
- Lowe, R. (2011). Promoting L2 metalanguage in the ESL classroom. *Bulletin of Ningen Bunka Kenkyu-jo (Human Culture Research Institute)*, 5, 60-68.
- Nunan, D. (1989). *Designing tasks for the communicative classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Richards, J. & Rodgers, T. (2001). *Approaches and methods in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Satake, Y. (2011). Methods to reduce Japanese students' use of L1 and silence for improving their use of English in an ELF classroom at a Japanese university. *Aoyama Standard Journal*, 6, 17-33.
- Sato, R. (2009). Suggestions for creating teaching approaches suitable to the Japanese EFL environment. *The Language Teacher*, 33(9), 11-14.

Sato, R. (2010). Reconsidering the effectiveness and suitability of PPP and TBLT in the Japanese EFL classroom. *JALT Journal*, 32(2), 189-200.

Robert Lowe is from Derbyshire, England, and has been teaching in Japan since 2008. He holds the Trinity College London Licentiate Diploma in TESOL, and is completing a Master's degree in Applied Linguistics at the University of Nottingham. He has worked at both private language schools and universities, and is currently an English instructor at Rikkyo University. His interests include student motivation, bilingual education, and the development and description of Asian Englishes. He can be contacted at <robertlowe@rikkyo.ac.jp>.

Appendix A

In your Advanced Intensive English classes, how much Japanese and how much English do you speak? (Choose 1)

1. Only Japanese.
2. Mostly Japanese, with a little English.
3. Half English and half Japanese.
4. Mostly English, with a little Japanese.
5. Only English.

When you speak in Japanese, what do you talk about? (Choose 3, from (1) most common, to (3) least common)

1. The work you are doing.
2. The instructions the teacher has given.
3. Part time job.
4. Other classes.
5. Social life.
6. Gossip.
7. Other (Please specify). _____

You've done the research, read the literature, and thought a lot. . .

What next?

Write it up and submit it to *The Language Teacher* of course!

See the Submissions Page on our website for more information!