

# Choice of Classroom Language in Beginners' German Classes in Japan: L1 or L2?

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This paper presents the results of an action research project which aimed to chronicle which language, Japanese or German, the teacher chose to use for instructions in the classroom. The teacher's instructions in a beginners' German class were recorded and analysed according to which language was used to fulfil certain functions, such as explaining grammar, giving instructions, or motivating students. The results revealed certain patterns in the choice of language for each function with generally more Japanese used than German. To enable the students to receive more target language input, it will be discussed how the L2 can be used more in beginners' classes. The paper mainly focuses on giving explanations, instructions, and checking comprehension, which were revealed to be the three most frequent functions of classroom language used in this case study.

本稿では、実践研究の一例を紹介する。このプロジェクトの目的は、日本語とドイツ語のどちらの言語を教師が授業の場で使用しているか、記録することにある。初學者向けのドイツ語授業における教員の指導内容を録音し、例えば文法を説明する際や指示を与える際、あるいは学習の動機付けを行う際など、発話の機能に応じてどの言語が使用されているかについての分析を行った。その結果、発話の機能に応じて、使用言語の選択にはある一定のパターンが見られ、また総じてドイツ語よりも日本語を多用していることが判明した。学生がより多くのドイツ語をインプットするためには、どのようにすれば初學者の授業においても目標言語を有効に活用できるか議論する必要がある。本稿では、主にこのケーススタディにおいて使用されたクラスルーム言語の中で最も頻繁にみられる機能であると判明した、説明、指示、理解度の確認という3つの機能に焦点を絞る。

**M**Y INTEREST in the choice and nature of the teacher's classroom language stems from classroom observations of German as a foreign language (GFL) classes in Japan. In these classes I noticed that not only the degree to which teachers used German and Japanese varied greatly, but also the purpose for which they used the language varied.

In Japan the foreign language classroom is often the only chance for the students to interact in or even hear the language they are learning. This is particularly true for languages like German, which hardly ever appear in the students' everyday lives. Consequently, the L2 input of the teacher plays a vital role for the students' learning process. My hypothesis is that the more carefully GFL teachers choose between the students' native and target languages, the more beneficial it is for the students' L2 acquisition.

In order to improve my own classroom language, I am currently conducting an action research study (based on Elliot, 1991), by investigating to what degree and for which func-



tions I use Japanese, German, or even English utterances. For this purpose, I recorded and analysed a German beginners' class at Hiroshima University and elaborated ways of making maximum use of the target language without overwhelming the students to the point where a lack of comprehension could lead to demotivation. The results may help other GFL teachers in Japan to reflect on their choice of classroom language, and they will also form the basis for my next action research cycle.

## Theoretical Background

There is enduring debate regarding to what extent, and for which functions the students' L1 should be used in L2 instruction. Some researchers emphasize interactional benefits, which ease communication and build better relationships between the teachers and the students (Nakayama, 2002; Holthouse, 2006); others believe that comparisons of linguistic structures between the students' L1 and L2, which form an integral part of L2 acquisition, should be accounted for in the teachers' input (Harbord, 1992; Kasjan, 2004; Turnbull & Dailey-O'Cain, 2009).

While it is generally acknowledged that the students' L1 can be used as a valuable resource in L2 instruction, to what degree and for which purposes this is brought about depends on the teaching context. This context varies with factors such as the teacher's and the students' competence in the languages concerned, the expectation of the institution and colleagues, the goal of the class, the motivation of the students, and the teacher's stance on using the students' L1. For monolingual L2 teaching contexts such as Japan, Yonesaka and Metoki (2007, p. 136) identified four positions teachers might have:

- *Virtual Position*: The classroom represents the "virtual" target country, in which there is no use for the students' L1.
- *Maximal Position*: The Teacher makes maximum use of the target language, while the L1 is only used because of teach-

ing and learning conditions, without any pedagogical value being attached to it.

- *Optimal Position*: The teacher acknowledges that some aspects of learning may be enhanced by the use of the students' L1.
- *Regressive Position*: The students' L1 is considered to be the most effective means of foreign language teaching in monolingual contexts.

Whatever stance teachers might have, it is important that they find out what is best for their own teaching context. In order to give learners the chance to benefit as much as possible from the teacher's input, the use of languages in the L2 classroom has to be didactically motivated. It has been noted, however, that teachers are not always aware of their language choice, and that they switch between the students' L1 and L2 intuitively rather than purposefully (Kim & Elder, 2008; Polio & Duff, 1994). Most studies of classroom language in Japan only focus on English. Due to the limited exposure and the comparatively short time students learn other languages such as German, French, or Chinese, there is a need to take the particular circumstances for those languages into account.

## Data Collection and Analysis

To investigate my own language of instruction, I chose a German beginners' class which consisted of 27 first-year students from the Faculty of Engineering. Within their degree programme a second foreign language apart from English was compulsory for one semester with two 90-minute classes per week. German was one of several options they could choose from.

I recorded my voice during each of the 28 lessons of this course. In this article, I will focus on the analysis of my language use during the first five lessons, in order to find out how much German and Japanese I used for learners who have no previous knowledge of the target language at all.

To analyse my language of instruction I transcribed all the utterances which were directed to the whole class. As my comments might have an impact on the way students process information, I avoided providing individual students with information that was not disclosed to the whole class. Japanese utterances were transcribed in romaji, which allowed an easier comparison of the length of utterances by means of a word count. After transcribing the audio data, utterances were allocated to different functions depending on the purpose for which I used the language. As a result, I developed an analysis scheme consisting of nine different functions, listed in Table 1. For each of these functions, subcategories were identified which are outlined in the right-hand column.

Table 1. Analysis Units

Functions	Subcategories
(1) presenting ...	(a) vocabulary, (b) grammar, (c) pronunciation, (d) dialogues
(2) explaining ...	(a) teaching contents, (b) methods of instruction, (c) linguistic structures
(3) providing information on ...	(a) the class itself, (b) homework, (c) tests or exams
(4) commenting through ...	(a) answers to students' questions, (b) asides, (c) structuring devices
(5) instruction geared at...	(a) L2 production, (b) L2 perception, (c) non-linguistic action
(6) checking ...	(a) students' comprehension, (b) results of their contributions
(7) correcting by ...	(a) providing right answers, (b) evaluating students' results

Functions	Subcategories
(8) motivating by ...	(a) humorous comments, (b) encouragements, (c) disciplining remarks
(9) speech acts, such as	(a) greetings, (b) thanks, (c) apologies

Table 2 shows a sample analysis scheme which demonstrates how functions were allocated to each utterance. English translations of the German (G) and Japanese (J) utterances are provided in brackets.

Table 2. Example of Analysis Scheme

Teacher	Students	Function	Language
Guten Morgen! [Good Morning!]		<i>speech act</i>	G
<i>Mazu kaiwa no renshū shi-mashô, Seite 94 Übung 2</i> [Let's start with a speaking exercise, page 94 exercise 2]		<i>commenting</i>	G / J
Bitte hören Sie die CD und lesen Sie den Text im Buch! [Please listen to the CD and read the text in the book!]		<i>instructing</i>	G
[Listening exercise]			
Shiranai tango arimasu ka? [Is there any word you don't understand?]	Firma? [Company?]	<i>checking</i>	J

Eine Firma ist zum Beispiel Mitsubishi, Matsuda, -] [A company is for example Mitsubishi, Matsuda, -]	Kuruma? [Car?]	<i>explaining</i>	G
Chigaimasu, kaisha desu. [No, it means "company"]		<i>correcting</i>	G / J
Noch etwas? Alles klar? [Anything else, alright?]		<i>checking</i>	G
Ok, dann sprechen wir einmal die neuen Wörter zusammen! [Ok, then let's pronounce the new words together!]		<i>instructing</i>	G
Firma [Company]	Firma [Company]	<i>presenting</i>	G
Raishû no minitesuto no tame sono kaiwa o oboeta hô ga î. [Please remember this dialogue for next week's short test!]		<i>informing</i>	J
Ganbatte ne! [Good luck!]		<i>motivating</i>	J

Note: G = German; J = Japanese

After allocating my language of instruction to the different functions, the frequency of use of each function was determined based on a word count. For each function the distribution of German, Japanese, and English items, was calculated. Apart from the analysis of the transcribed data, I wrote a teacher's log after each lesson. In this log I reflected upon my language use and made notes of problems or difficulties which occurred during the class in connection with the use of my classroom language, and how they might be improved. By interpreting the transcribed data based on the teacher's log, I looked for patterns of use in my classroom language in order to see to what degree my language use was didactically based and consistent. In order to get an insight into how my language of instruction is perceived by the learners, I conducted a written survey before and after the course. The results of this survey are published in Harting (2012) and will be correlated to data obtained in the next action research cycle to measure the effectiveness of my altered use of language for instructions in the classroom.

## Results

The results of this study will be demonstrated according to the different functions under investigation.

## Distribution of Functions

In the first five lessons of the beginners' class, my language of instruction was 54.7% Japanese, 44.6% German, and 0.6% English. Table 3 lists the percentages of German, Japanese, and English utterances according to the nine functions, which are ranked by their frequency of appearance. The percentages in brackets indicate the amount of my utterances taken up by each function.

Table 3. Distribution of Functions

Functions	German	Japanese	English
Explaining (32.0%)	26.0%	71.0%	3.0%
Instructing (20.0%)	31.0%	69.0%	0.0%
Checking (18.0%)	69.0%	31.0%	0.1%
Presenting (10.0%)	91.0%	9.0%	0.0%
Commenting (9.0%)	44.0%	56.0%	0.1%
Correcting (7.0%)	74.0%	23.0%	3.0%
Informing (3.0%)	7.0%	93.0%	0.0%
Motivating (0.5%)	0.0%	100.0%	0.0%
Speech Acts (0.5%)	59.0%	41.0%	0.0%
Total	44.6%	54.7%	0.6%

As can be seen from Table 3 about a third of the language I used in the classroom was made up of *explanations*. *Instruction commands* and *comprehension checks* each took up about 20% of the time. Around 10% of my instruction time was devoted to *presenting* target language items, making *comments*, and *correcting* students' answers. Far less words were used to provide *information* about the class, to deliver *speech acts* like greetings, and to motivate the students.

As far as the choice of language within the individual functions is concerned, the highest percentage of L2 (German) use was found in the functions of *presenting* L2 items, *correcting* students' mistakes, *checking* comprehension, and also for *speech acts*. More Japanese was used for *motivating* the students, *providing information* on the class or institutional issues, giving *explanations* and *instructions*, and for *comments*. English was used rather marginally within *explanations* and *corrections* and to an even lesser extent within *comprehension checks* and *comments*. In the following sections I will demonstrate how the three most fre-

quent functions of explaining, instructing, and checking – which made up 70% of my total input – were performed by taking a closer look at the distribution of subcategories and by uncovering patterns for the choice of language.

### Explaining

More than two thirds of explanations were performed in the students' native language, just over a quarter in the target language and 3% in English. Table 4 shows the distribution of the individual subcategories of explanations.

Table 4. Explaining

Explaining ...	German	Japanese	English
... structures (46.0%)	29.0%	68.0%	3.0%
... contents (37.0%)	28.0%	68.0%	4.0%
... methods (17.0%)	16.0%	84.0%	0.0%
Total	26.0%	71.0%	3.0%

About half of the items in this category were devoted to explaining structures of the target language, 37% were explanations about the content of L2 dialogues, and just under a fifth were explanations such as how to complete certain exercises. While in explanations of structures and content about a third of the items were already in the target language German, explanations of methods – probably due to their complexity – relied heavily, 84%, on the use of the students' native language. Overall, German was used:

- if a structure could easily be explained by listing examples of the same type, as in “Deutschland, Thailand, Griechenland [Germany, Thailand, Greece]”,
- for items, which only contained vocabulary the students

were already familiar with, as in “*sehen* heißt auf Japanisch *miru* [*sehen* means *miru* in Japanese]”.

Japanese was mainly used:

- for explaining grammar, as in “*shugo desu, ninsho daimeshi, ich, watashi* [this is a noun; *ich* meaning *watashi* is a personal pronoun]”,
- to refer to grammatical terms like “*dôshi* [verb]”, “*shugo* [subject]”, or “*daimeishi* [pronoun]”,
- as a translation device, as in “*was wa nani, wo wa doko* [‘was’ means ‘nani’ and ‘wo’ means ‘doko’]”,
- as a means for explaining how to do exercises, as in “*ue kara tango erande, sono mama de kaite kudasai* [please choose a word from above and write it down in the same way]”,
- to explain content during the presentation of L2 items, as in “*tsugi wa musubi no aisatsu: Auf Wiedersehen* [the next word is a farewell statement: *L2 item*]”.

The English items found in this category were used:

- as a translation of related German words, as in “*Kollegin* wa *eigo* *colleague* [*Kollegin* is *colleague* in English]”,
- to indicate the similarity between German and English grammatical structures: “*kore wa eigo no to be, I am, you are, eigo demo fukisokudôshi, doitsu mo sô desu* [this is *to be, I am, you are* in English, as in English it is an irregular verb in German]”.

## Instructing

Instruction commands were mostly given in the students’ native language Japanese. Table 5 demonstrates the distribution of German, Japanese, and English commands for each subcategory.

Table 5. Instructing

Instruction geared at ...	German	Japanese	English
... L2 production (71.0%)	34.0%	66.0%	0.0%
... L2 reception (18.0%)	24.0%	76.0%	0.0%
... non-linguistic action (11.0%)	22.5%	76.5%	0.0%
Total	31.0%	69.0%	0.0%

As can be seen from Table 5 more than two thirds of the instruction commands were aimed at students’ L2 production (like speaking, writing, or reading aloud), under a fifth to L2 reception (listening or reading) and just over 10% to non-linguistic action, such as asking the students to stand up, sit down, or to mingle. The German/Japanese ratio was about one to four in commands for reception and action, while in commands geared at L2 production German made up just over a third. English items were not used at all in commands.

German was used for commands when the students were already familiar with the vocabulary, like “*buchstabieren Sie!* [spell!]” or for commands which could be understood easily by gestures or illustrations, like “*bitte, sprechen Sie* [please speak!]”, or “*hören wir einmal* [let’s listen!]”. Japanese, on the other hand, was used for commands which contained unknown vocabulary, like “*tsugi wa isshô ni hanashimashô!* [let’s speak together next]”, “*suisoku shite kudasai* [please guess!]”, or “*yaku shitekudasai* [please translate]”. Also, Japanese was used for small hints within commands, like “*rei no yôni* [as in the example]” or as a translation if there was no response to a German command, like in “*kommst du mal nach vorne? chotto koko ni kite kudasai* [please come up to the front + *Japanese translation*]”.

## Checking

Checking students’ knowledge was largely performed in the target language. Japanese was used in less than a third of the cases.

Table 6 demonstrates the distribution of German, Japanese, and English comprehension checks for each subcategory.

Table 6. Checking

Checking students' knowledge by ...	German	Japanese	English
... comparing results of their exercises (83.0%)	73.0%	27.0%	0.1%
... asking genuine questions (9.0%)	37.0%	63.0%	0.0%
... comprehension checks (8.0%)	69.0%	31.0%	0.0%
Total	69.0%	30.9%	0.1%

Most of the items (83%) within the function of checking aimed at checking the results of students' exercises. Genuine questions or comprehension checks each made up just under 10%. German was mainly used for questions which contained vocabulary the students were already familiar with, as in "Kennen Sie Evita? [do you know ...]", "nicht auf Englisch? [... in English?]", or "alles klar? [alright?]", Also, German served to control results of students' exercises by providing a limited choice of answers, as in "A, B, C?", "Ja, Nein? [yes, no?]", or "richtig, falsch? [right, wrong?]", Japanese was used for more complex questions like "Dōshite namibia de doitsugo o hanashimasuka? [Why is German spoken in Namibia?]" or to check comprehension by letting students translate into L2 "watashi wa doitsu kara kimashita: L2 translation by students [I am from Germany: L2 translation by students]". At times, slightly more complex Japanese comprehension checks were used as an alternative to the rather simple German ones the students were already familiar with, as in "chotto shiranai tokoro arimasuka? [Is there anything you don't understand?]".

## Summary and Discussion

The results of this first action research cycle helped to uncover my teaching routines concerning the use of German, Japanese, and English in a beginners' German class. According to the frequency analysis (Table 3) I was using more Japanese than German. However, regarding the four positions described by Yonesaka and Metoki (2007), I would prefer to deliver a class in line with the ideals of the *Optimal Position*, i.e. acknowledging the learners' L1 as a valuable resource, but still striving to give them as much L2 input as possible. As far as the choice of language for a particular function is concerned, the qualitative analysis of my utterances revealed, that my language choice was generally consistent, showing similar patterns throughout the five teaching units under investigation. However, when it comes to making use of the L2 to its utmost potential, there is still much room for improvement. Therefore, I decided to reconsider my choice of language towards a more L2-oriented instruction.

By taking a closer look at my choice of language, my use of the learners' L1 seems to be justified for functions such as motivating them, providing crucial information, and explaining grammatical structures. Even with simplified L2 input or other linguistic or non-linguistic aids, these functions cannot be performed effectively in the target language for complete beginners. However, as far as giving instructions and speech acts are concerned, I believe I could make more use of the L2, since these functions are routine in the L2 classroom and can easily be understood by contextual clues. The same applies for explaining simple content or how to do exercises as well as comprehension checks, most of which might easily be expressed in the L2 by using gestures, providing examples, or by illustrations on the blackboard. Also, lengthy L1 grammar explanations might be substituted by well-illustrated L2 examples highlighting the structure to be taught. Since explanations, instructions, and corrections made up 70% of my total input (see Table 3), an in-

creased L2 use to fulfil these functions, might change the overall distribution of instruction languages considerably.

These alterations towards a more L2-oriented teaching approach will be initiated and analysed in a new action research cycle to be carried out in a similar context. To measure whether my altered approach is effective or not, students' outcomes and opinions of the two action research cycles will be compared. For that purpose I kept a record of all students' test results. In addition, a survey was conducted at the beginning and after completion of the course to obtain feedback from the students regarding my language use. By comparing the results of the students' feedback with my own reflections of my language use, I hope to be able to improve my instruction language step by step to satisfy not only my own but also the students' aspirations.

It is true that the choice of classroom language is a highly context-dependent and also personal issue. However, if more German teachers in Japan could be encouraged to do similar studies in their classes, their findings could be compared and conclusions could be drawn as to what kind of language use works best.

## Bio Data

**Axel Harting** did his PhD on German and Japanese email writing and is teaching German at Hiroshima University. His research fields are L2 writing, L2 didactics, and pragmatics.

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