

# German Teachers' Classroom Language Seen From the Learners' Perspective

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How do Japanese students of German perceive their teachers' language of instruction? In pursuit of answering this question, a survey was carried out with 3 learner groups of 1st-, 2nd-, and 3rd- year students. Containing open and closed questions, the survey aimed at getting the students' opinion on their teacher's use of German and Japanese in class and their preferences for which of these languages should be used for certain teaching purposes. The results show that the higher the L2 competence of the students, the more they are inclined towards being taught in the target language. Also, differences between the learner groups were revealed concerning their language preference for certain teaching purposes, such as explaining, correcting, or giving instructions regarding exercises. The learners' feedback will provide an incentive for German teachers to reflect on their language of instruction and adjust it to better accommodate students' expectations and needs.

日本人のドイツ語学習者は、教師が使用するクラスルーム言語をどのように捉えているのであろうか。この問題に答えるにあたり、1年次、2年次、3年次の学生に対して質的・量的な質問項目を含むアンケート調査を行った。あわせて、特定の指導目的においてどの言語が使用されることを彼らは好むのかについても質問項目を設定した。このアンケートの結果から以下のことが明らかとなった。すなわち学習者は言語レベルが向上するに伴い、目標言語であるドイツ語が使用されることを望んでいた。また、説明、訂正、あるいは練習問題の説明などの特定の指導目的において、それぞれの学習グループ間では使用されるクラスルーム言語の要望に違いが見られた。ドイツ語教師にとって学習者のフィードバックは、自身が指導している言語を考察し、学習者の期待と要望に沿った指導を行うための指針となると思われる。

**T**HE LANGUAGE the teacher uses in the classroom is crucial for learners' L2 acquisition, especially if the classroom is their only chance to hear or interact in the target language. The monolingual teaching context in Japan offers German as a foreign language (GFL) teachers the opportunity to use both the students' native language Japanese as well as their target language German as a medium of instruction. Most German teachers may use both languages to varying degrees and for various purposes. However, often the choice of language is not deeply reflected on and is driven by routines or considerations of convenience.

In an attempt to improve my language of instruction, I am currently conducting an action research study (based on Elliot, 1991). In a previous publication I have already analysed and evaluated my use of Japanese and German during GFL instruction (Harting, 2012). This paper will focus on students' perception of my instruction language in order to accommodate it more to their wishes and needs. My hypothesis is that the higher the students' L2 competence, the

higher is also their expectation for the target language to be the language of classroom interaction.

In order to test this hypothesis and to pinpoint strengths and weaknesses of my language use, I conducted a written survey after the completion of three German courses of 1st-, 2nd-, and 3rd-year students. After providing some background information on previous studies on classroom language and demonstrating the methodological approach of this study, the qualitative and quantitative results of the survey will be presented.

### Previous Studies on Classroom Language

Since the language the teacher uses for instruction is a very individual and often also sensitive issue, studies in this field, in particular empirical ones, are rather rare. As far as foreign language teaching in Japan is concerned, most studies focus on English. For German, only Gunske von Kölln (2010) touched on this issue in an action research study designed to compare an inductive and a deductive teaching approach. The results, measured by the students' performance on a test, suggest that the inductive approach, which also contained more L2 instruction, was more effective. However, since the language of instruction was only one variable among many, more research is needed to see how the teacher's language choice influences acquisition.

There are differing opinions among researchers and practitioners as to what extent and for which purposes students' L1 should be used in L2 instruction. While some promote the use of the students' L1 for 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 should be accounted for in the teachers' input, because in their acquisition process, learners resort to their L1 as a matter of course (Harbord, 1992; Kasjan, 2004).

Following the ideals of Krashen's (1985) natural approach, some teachers still favour using the target language only. However, it is meanwhile 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 (Turnbull & Dailey-O'Cain, 2009). This context varies with factors such as the teachers' 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.

To give learners the chance to benefit as much as possible from the teacher's input, the language used in the L2 classroom has to be pedagogically motivated. Therefore, the teacher's choice of either L1 or L2 for instruction should be determined by which of them will serve a given teaching purpose best. 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). In order for teachers to become more aware of their language use, Yonesaka and Metoki (2007) have developed a practical checklist called *Functions of Instructor First-language Use (FIFU)*, which encourages teachers to investigate their own teaching practices. The checklist contains questions on their choice of either L1 or L2 for certain teaching purposes and helps them to reflect on and improve their teaching routines.

### Methodological Approach

For this study two types of data were used: audio recordings of my 1st-, 2nd-, and 3rd-year German classes and a written survey conducted with the students after the completion of each course. The voice recordings served to analyse my use of German and Japanese, which provided the background for evaluating the students' feedback to my instruction language.

This feedback was obtained by a questionnaire that mainly contained closed questions, providing statements on my use of German and Japanese. The students were asked to indicate their level of agreement to these statements on a 5-point scale (-2, -1, 0, 1, 2); negative figures indicate disagreement and positive figures agreement. The same scale was used to measure the students' preference of either German (positive figures) or Japanese (negative figures) for certain teaching purposes, such as explaining, correcting, or giving instructions to exercises. The averages of the students' responses were calculated and are represented in the discussion of the results by symbols indicating (dis)agreement (-, +) or language preference (J, G).

In addition to the closed questions, the students were also asked to comment on their (dis)satisfaction with my language use and to make suggestions for improvement by means of a written comment. These comments were analysed qualitatively and served to explain the quantitative findings. Since the survey was conducted in the students' native language, I translated quotes from their comments into English. The years in brackets at the end of each quote indicate the students' affiliation to one of the three learner groups compared in this study.

## Results

Before presenting the students' feedback on my instruction language and their suggestions for improvement, I will characterize the three learner groups and my language of instruction in each group based on the audio recordings.

### **Variation of Instruction Language According to Learner Groups**

The three learner groups under investigation in this study will be referred to as 1st-year, 2nd-year, and 3rd-year students

according to their years of study. Background data on these groups are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1. Characteristics of Learner Groups**

Learner Group	1st year	2nd year	3rd year
Years of study	1	2	3
Class size	27	14	9
Class type	compulsory	voluntary	voluntary
Faculty	Engineering	mainly Literature	mainly Literature
Level of L2	beginners	upper beginners	lower intermediates
Textbook	Schritte International 1	Schritte International 3	Schritte International 5
Instruction language used	mostly Japanese	German / Japanese	mostly German

As can be seen from Table 1, the three learner groups differed not only in size, but also according to the students' areas of study. All 27 first-year students belonged to the Faculty of Engineering and had chosen German as an elective from among several languages to fulfil the L2 requirement of their degree. Most of the 2nd- and 3rd-year students, on the other hand, were from the Faculty of Literature majoring in German and had chosen the voluntary course under discussion in this paper to improve their general communicative and grammatical skills. According to the students' level of L2 competence, different volumes of the German textbook *Schritte International* were used, which addressed different levels of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)*: level A1 (beginners) for 1st-year students, A2 (upper beginners) for 2nd-year students, and B1

(lower intermediates) for 3rd-year students. Due to the fact that I used different levels of the same textbook series in all of the classes, my approach to instruction and the way I structured lessons and exercises was very similar. However, according to the level of the students' L2 competence, the degree to which I used German or Japanese as the language of instruction varied.

First-year students were mainly instructed in Japanese; German was only used to present and practice (the pronunciation of) new target language items mainly taken from the textbook. Only very marginally did I use German for communicative purposes, for example in speech acts ("Good Morning!" or "Sorry!" or "Thank you!"), in simple commands such as ("Please read" or "Listen to the CD"), or for corrections of students' wrong or mispronounced contributions, in which case I provided the right solution. Whenever I used German, I supported the meaning of my utterance by using realia, repetition, pictures, illustrations (on the black board or from the textbook), gestures, intonation, or translations into the students' L1.

For 2nd-year students I tended to use much more German, often accompanied by a Japanese translation. Compared to 1st-year classes, most of my commands were in German, and I started explaining new vocabulary items by simple descriptions or rewordings in the target language. Also, comprehension checks ("Alright?" or "What does X mean?" or "How do you say X in Japanese?") and remarks during the lesson ("First we listen to the dialogue and then we will read the text") were provided in German. For explanations of grammar, methods, or contents, however, I mostly used Japanese to ensure that all students could understand these complex utterances.

For 3rd-year students most of my instructions were in German. Even for longer, more complicated grammatical explanations or for the announcement of homework or tests I used the L2. I spoke slowly, stressed key words, and sometimes provided a Japanese translation of a difficult German word that was cru-

cial to understand the meaning. Only for informal chats with the students or for motivating (or in rather rare cases disciplining) them did I resort to their native language. In comparison to the other learner groups, the German I used with 3rd-year students also had a communicative purpose.

### Feedback on Teacher's Use of German

As far as my use of German is concerned, my aim was to find out whether the students had sufficient exposure to the target language and whether they were able to understand my L2 utterances. Table 2 lists the students' level of agreement to the statements provided in the questionnaire.

Table 2. Students Views Regarding Teacher's Use of German

Statement on questionnaire	1st year	2nd year	3rd year
There was enough opportunity to use German in exercises.	++	+	++
There was enough opportunity to hear German.	+	+	+
There was enough opportunity to use German in authentic situations.	- +	-	+
I would like to have had more instructions given in German.	--	-	+
The teacher's use of German was hard to understand.	-	- +	--

Note. (+) + (strongly) agree (-) - (strongly) disagree - + indifferent

As the results indicate, students of all levels agreed that they had enough opportunities to hear the target language in the classroom: "It was good that the teacher spoke to us in German a lot and we could listen to his language" (1st year). Also, all students appreciated the fact that they could use the target language within communicative exercises: "I found it particularly helpful that there were lots of opportunities to do speaking exercises in small groups of two to four students. Thanks to these language applications I learnt how to use different expressions and I could also hear how the other students spoke" (3rd year). While learners of all levels agreed that they could use the target language sufficiently in communicative exercises, only 3rd-year students had the impression that there were also enough opportunities to use German in authentic communicative interaction.

Regarding the amount of my target language input, 1st- and 2nd-year students seemed to be satisfied, while 3rd-year students responded that they would like to have had more target language instructions: "The teacher sometimes explained new words not by a Japanese translation, but by using simple German explanations. This method should be used more often" (3rd year). In their comments, 2nd-year students welcomed my ambition to use German increasingly: "It was helpful that the teacher explained the meaning of new words in German" (2nd year). Some also appreciated the challenge of being instructed in the target language: "On principle, instruction was in German only, which meant that I had to give the right amount of focus to the lessons" (2nd year).

As the quantitative data suggest, 1st- and 3rd-year students did not seem to have any difficulties in following my German instructions, while for 2nd-year students too much use of the target language sometimes resulted in a lack of comprehension. In their comments they expressed their wish for more L1 support: "Sometimes it was difficult to understand everything with a German explanation only" (2nd year).

### Feedback on Teacher's Use of Japanese

Concerning my use of the students' L1, Table 3 lists the students' level of agreement to the statements provided in the survey.

**Table 3. Students Views Regarding Teacher's Use of Japanese**

Statement on questionnaire	1st year	2nd year	3rd year
It was helpful that the teacher could speak Japanese.	++	++	++
It was possible to ask questions in Japanese.	++	++	+
The teacher's use of Japanese was hard to understand.	--	-	--
The teacher's code switching (German/ Japanese) was irritating.	--	--	--

Note. (+) + (strongly) agree (-) - (strongly) disagree + indifferent

As the results show, learners of all three groups thought it was helpful that I was able to speak Japanese and that they could ask questions in their native language. This is illustrated in the following comments given by 2nd-year students: "I was grateful that the teacher explained difficult things in Japanese" (2nd year) and "Thanks to the fact that the teacher used Japanese quite often, I could easily understand what I was supposed to do" (2nd year).

The fact that from year 2 on I started to make explanations and answer students' questions in the target language seemed to have caused concern for some learners as the following comments show: "The teacher should answer students' questions

in Japanese" (2nd year) and "The teacher's instructions would have been easier to understand if difficult grammatical structures had been explained in Japanese" (2nd year). This reflects the students' difficulties in adjusting to a more L2-based teaching approach, and it indicates their desire for L1 instruction when understanding is crucial.

As far as the quantitative results indicate, my Japanese was overall easy to understand and learners did not think that my frequent code switching between their native and target languages was problematic: "The teacher's language use was well balanced" (3rd year).

### Preferred Language of Instruction

Apart from the feedback to my own language of instruction, the students were also asked to indicate their general language preference for different functions of the classroom, such as explaining, correcting, and checking comprehension. Table 4 lists the students' preferences for either German (G) or Japanese (J).

**Table 4. Students' Language Preference According to Classroom Functions**

Preferred language for ...	1st year	2nd year	3rd year
announcements of tests, exams, homework	J	J	J > G
grammar explanations	J	J	J = G
disciplining students	J	J > G	J > G
commands geared at L2 production	J > G	J = G	G > J
explanations of methods	J > G	J = G	G > J

corrections of students' contributions	J > G	G > J	G
informal chats with students	J > G	G > J	G > J
checking students' comprehension	J = G	J = G	G > J
speech acts, such as greetings, thanks, apologies	G	G	G

*Note.* > slight preference of the language mentioned first; = indifference or equal preference

As the results indicate, students of all learner groups would prefer that their teacher used Japanese when disciplining them or when providing crucial information, such as the announcement of homework, tests, or exams. The same applies to explanations of grammar; only 3rd-year students thought that grammar may as well be explained in the target language.

When it comes to explaining methods (i.e., explanations of how to perform exercises) and commands geared towards L2 production (e.g., calling students up to answer questions, to read, or to speak), there were marked differences between the three learner groups. While 2nd-year students were undecided in this respect, 1st-year students preferred Japanese and 3rd-year students preferred German. A similar trend was revealed for corrections of students' contributions and for informal chats, although 2nd-year students already showed a slight preference for German here.

As for checking students' comprehension, 1st- and 2nd-year students did not show any particular language preference, while 3rd-year students seemed to slightly prefer German. For speech acts, such as greetings, thanks, or apologies, students of all learner groups again agreed that they should be performed in the target language.



## Summary and Discussion

The quantitative results of this study lend support to my hypothesis that the higher the L2 competence of the learners, the more they wish to be instructed in the target language. However, in their written comments students of the same learner group expressed different opinions on the appropriate amount of German or Japanese for their instruction; for some it was too much German, for others not enough.

This suggests that individual differences in learning styles have to be taken into account in L2 instruction. Depending on their cognitive abilities, their social skills, and their motivation for learning the L2, learners with the same level of L2 might respond quite differently towards the language of instruction used. While some might perceive it as a positive challenge to discern relevant information from L2 instructions that are still beyond their own competence, others might be more inclined to receive L1 instructions they could follow more easily.

While it is certainly a desirable aim for teachers to give students as much opportunity as possible to hear and actively use the target language in the classroom, they should also allow students with less tolerance for ambiguity of meaning to be able to follow instructions easily by also using the students' L1. Carrying out this action research project allowed me to reflect more on the language I use in the classroom and to put into question teaching routines that I have built up over years of practice.

Although the quantitative results of the survey support my original intuition to use more L2 in classes with advanced learners, I became aware of individual differences concerning the students' wishes and abilities. To see my language of instruction from the students' perspective provided an incentive for me to experiment with the language I use in the classroom and to regularly obtain feedback from the students. To improve instruction, both teachers as well as students need to have an open mind and flexibility for new approaches. A mutual dialogue on

issues such as the teacher's instruction language can certainly help to improve L2 teaching and to build better relations between teachers and students.

## 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. <harting@hiroshima-u.ac.jp>

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