How Russian Teachers of English Perceive Learners' Native Tongue

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For this paper I investigated what Russian teachers of English in Japan know and believe about the role and use of learners' native tongue (or L1) in the classroom and how it influences their educational practices. Through qualitative research, I argue that teachers are aware of and support the methodological principles defined by the Russian school of teaching foreign languages, which advocates for active use of the native tongue in the classroom. Discussion of their educational practices shows that teachers consistently use the Japanese language and culture explicitly and implicitly. The study analysed how and why teachers use Japanese while teaching English. I propose four principles of using learners' native tongue in the classroom, argue that the value of the native tongue must be acknowledged, and advocate for further research into effective ways to incorporate the Japanese language and culture into English lessons to make them more communicative and meaningful.

本研究は、日本において英語を教えているロシア人教師に焦点を当て、学習者による教室内の母語活用（本研究では日本語）に関する知識及び信念を明らかにした上で、それらが教師による教育実践にいかに反映されているのかを述べていく。質的研究を通して、教師は学習者による母語活用を奨励するロシアの外国語教育の知識を共有することが明らかとなった。そして教師は授業中、日本語・日本文化を明示的及び暗示的に活用していることが浮き彫りになった。本研究はそれらの教育実践を分析し、母語活用を支える教育原理を提唱する。さらに英語の授業が学習者にとってより深い意味を持つために英語教室内の日本語・日本文化の価値を再考し、それらをいかに盛り込むのかを明確にする研究が求められていることを述べる。

It has been noted in several studies that there is a strong connection between a teacher's teaching beliefs, teacher education, and teaching practices (Borg, 2003; Nishino, 2009). Borg (2003) used the term *teacher cognition* to refer to what teachers know, believe, and think, and asserted that teacher's beliefs, knowledge, professional preparation, and classroom practices are mutually shaped and constantly interact with each other.

In the EFL field an extensive body of literature has been dedicated to teachers' beliefs concerning the role and use of learners' native tongue (or L1) in the classroom. As Turnbull and Dailey-O'Cain (2009) pointed out, this topic is quite controversial; two opposite stances exist and EFL teachers actively support both stances. On one side, there are teachers who draw on the L1 = L2 learning hypothesis (Ellis, 1986; Krashen, 1981); they argue that avoiding learners' L1 ensures maximum exposure to comprehensible input in the target language and believe that codeswitching might interfere with target language development. On the other side, there are teachers who follow Cummins's (1979) theory of interdependence and Vygotskian socio-

cultural theory (1934) and advocate for thoughtful use of learners' L1 that would enhance learners' comprehension and help to develop codeswitching practices typical of bilinguals.

It must be emphasized that this controversy has been mainly reflected in Anglo-American academic literature, as the works mentioned above are written in English and often cited by English-speaking researchers. The EFL field in Japan has been heavily influenced by this research. Therefore when domestic studies explore teacher's beliefs and educational practices (e.g., Duff & Uchida, 1997; McMillan, Rivers, & Cripps, 2009) they mention the same opposite stances and discuss findings in the same format. However, scant attention has been paid to the non-Japanese and nonnative teachers of English who teach in different educational institutions and multiple conversational schools throughout Japan but who have not been influenced as heavily by the Anglo-American framework in EFL because they were professionally trained within a different theoretical framework.

This paper focuses on Russian teachers of English in Japan who were trained in the Russian school of Teaching Foreign Languages (TFL) framework, developed independently by the Soviet academia, and explores their attitudes towards the use of Japanese in the classroom. First, through qualitative interviews, the teachers' knowledge is investigated and the theoretical framework of the Russian School of TFL is briefly recalled. The teachers' overall attitude toward the use of the learners' L1 is described and the methodological principles concerning its use in the classroom are outlined. The author then explores the teachers' beliefs, whether their knowledge is supported by their beliefs, and whether their beliefs are supported by their knowledge. Lastly, the educational practices shared by the teachers are analysed and four principles of using the native tongue in the classroom are identified.

Framing the Study

Research Questions

When Borg (2003) discussed teachers' cognition, he referred to what teachers know, believe, and think, or, as interpreted by the author, their beliefs and knowledge. He also pointed out that a key question that must be addressed is how these beliefs and knowledge interact with classroom practices. As the aim of this study is to focus on the use of the learners' L1 in the classroom, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What do Russian teachers of EFL in Japan know and believe about using the native tongue in the classroom?
2. In what ways do the teachers make use of their students' native tongue?

To answer question one, excerpts of transcribed data will be presented and analysed. To answer question two, educational techniques with examples shared by the teachers will be described, according to principles identified by the author.

Research Setting

The research was conducted between March 2012 and June 2013 to explore what Russian teachers of English who teach in Japan know, believe, and do where the learners' native tongue is concerned. As Pajares (1992) pointed out, to gain in-depth insights on teachers' beliefs, qualitative research methods such as narrative or interviews are appropriate. Therefore, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted in Russian and English with three Russian teachers who teach English in the Kanto area, one-on-one, on two or three occasions. Nine and a half hours of recorded data were transcribed, translated into English by the author when necessary, and then analysed in order to answer the research questions.

Participants

The Russian teachers of English in this study had been professionally trained and had had teaching experience in Russia. Three female Russian teachers in their 20s and 30s, Karina, Lyudmila and Ekaterina (all names are pseudonyms), were interviewed by the author, who knows them professionally. All three teachers (a) had received their BEd in Teaching Foreign Languages (English as major and Japanese as minor) from pedagogical universities in Russia, where they had also received their pre-service training, (b) have teaching experience in universities in Russia, and (c) are fluent in oral and written Japanese. Karina and Lyudmila teach at different conversational schools and Ekaterina teaches at a private university. Three interviews were conducted with Karina and two interviews were conducted with Lyudmila and Ekaterina. Karina and Lyudmila chose to be interviewed in Russian while Ekaterina felt more comfortable in English.

Results & Discussion

What Teachers Know

When asked about the theory of teaching foreign languages they are familiar with, all three teachers outlined major works by Russian psychologists such as Vygotsky and his disciples Leontiev and Luria. They mentioned Vygotskian constructivist theory and the zone of proximal development but emphasised the importance of the idea that the "native tongue cannot be ignored but random use of two or more languages can be harmful" expressed by Vygotsky (1935, p. 56) in his final work.

Karina, who graduated from the university just 3 years ago, brought up pedagogical works by Scherba (1945) and Zimnyaya (2005) and even paraphrased one of Scherba's (1945) articles: "a learner understands the meaning of a foreign language utterance only after finding its equivalent in native tongue." Lyudmila and Ekaterina did not mention any pedagogical works but after being prompted about Scherba's ideas, commented that this was developed by Bim (1977), an academic and educator who outlined the national policy of teaching German as a second foreign language in secondary schools and became the author of several textbooks of German that were recommended by the Russian Ministry of Education and were used in schools between 1984 and 2004 (Bim, 2005).

Ekaterina indicated that the most useful resource for her was the set of methodological principles formulated by Passov (1989). She commented that she learnt by heart the principle that the "learner's native tongue is used as a base for learning foreign languages" and referred to it every time she planned her lessons. Ekaterina explained that her educational practices included "emphasis on theoretical knowledge, . . . detailed comparative analysis of language systems, . . . [and] explicit instruction of language categories," which are all key elements of the principle.

Karina also mentioned Passov's principles and indicated that for her the most important principle was "focus on commonalities rather than differences that exist between languages." She was aware of the general belief that English and Japanese have very little in common and tried to demonstrate to her students that it was not entirely true, while at the same time enhancing positive interference and explicit links between the languages.

Lyudmila remembered another principle, which in Russian is formulated as "giving the learners' native tongue consideration" and emphasises the practical use of it in the classroom. Lyudmila commented that this principle helped her to organise linguistic material in a way that would minimise negative interference of the learners' L1. She also mentioned that her knowledge of this principle together with her proficiency in Japanese allowed her to foresee learners' possible mistakes and to teach English, especially vocabulary and grammar, in a way

that kept her students from making mistakes frequently made by Japanese learners.

The Russian school of TFL, developed in Soviet times, did not allow much room for debate and there was no second opinion about using the learner's L1. The theoretical framework, supported by psychological, pedagogical, and methodological research, stated that the learners' native tongue had to be used and sought for an effective way to do so. As is indicated in the interviews, all three teachers were aware of this attitude towards L1 in the classroom, could remember a number of ideas expressed by the Russian academics and educators, and claimed to be using them in their educational practices.

What Teachers Believe

In this study, the researcher also sought to discover teachers' views and beliefs concerning the use of the learners' L1 in the classroom and analyse whether the beliefs contradicted their theoretical knowledge. Questions were asked about the use of L1 skills during an English lesson, what teachers believed to be a good grammar and vocabulary instruction, main areas where Japanese learners struggle the most, the reasons behind the struggle, and the role of translation between English and Japanese.

Karina

During the interviews, Karina was outspoken and openly expressed her discontent with the direct method that was imposed by her school. She felt that this method was slowing her adult students down and did not allow them to develop as competent English users. She commented that

> It is silly to pretend that adult learners can learn the same way as children. Adults don't have 3 years to start talking. They want to talk right away and that is why they must use what they already have, their skills in their native tongue.

According to Karina, her students possess a great variety of skills necessary to master English, for example, the ability "to control their mouth and lips," and "awareness of one's breath while pronouncing English words." She also emphasised that adults can articulate their thoughts logically and analyse whether they make sense, which is very important when they seek to acquire speaking skills.

When asked about the areas where her students struggle the most, Karina mentioned general grammar knowledge and parts of speech. She commented that her students found it difficult to identify parts of speech and to use them correctly in a sentence. She felt they lacked morphological knowledge and needed explicit instruction in this area. Karina suggested that

> If only I could translate their (students') sentences into Japanese during the lesson then they would realise that their sentences don't make any sense, that it was impossible to connect parts of speech like this.

Karina believes that translation can be a useful tool to enhance students' conscious learning and make the lesson less mechanical and more meaningful. She regretted her inability to explain certain grammar units explicitly or introduce some vocabulary with their equivalents in Japanese because "it would have saved time and allowed more time for conversational practice."

Lyudmila

Lyudmila recognised that English and Japanese are quite different languages and that many aspects of English, such as pronunciation, are challenging for her students. She expressed

her readiness to teach phonics and reading rules from scratch, using the same techniques for both young and adult learners. However, she noted that teaching vocabulary had to be different, as adults' vocabulary is generally vast compared with that of children and, moreover, adult learners know a large number of Japanese words borrowed from English (*gairaigo*) and are able to use them correctly in a sentence.

When asked about the areas where her students needed development, Lyudmila commented,

> Morphology is definitely a must. I noticed many students struggle with forming adverbs from adjectives or cannot identify what part of speech the word is. It is difficult to form sentences if you don't know these basics.

Like Karina, Lyudmila believes that explicit grammar instruction is necessary and feels that the direct method does not provide enough opportunities to improve students' grammar competence. She mentioned that her school did not allow any translation in the lesson and has instructed teachers not to encourage their students to translate. The idea behind this is that students should fully immerse in English and use their English repertoire without relying on Japanese. Lyudmila, however, was dubious about the utility of such an approach. She said,

> In my lessons I can see how my students translate from Japanese, inside their heads, and I don't think it is bad. It gives them the structure of a sentence; they know what they are trying to say. They are able to notice that sometimes what they are saying is irrelevant. I myself translate when I read something difficult or make a presentation.

Lyudmila believes that translation is inevitable and is a powerful tool to accomplish challenging tasks in a foreign language. She recognises that she uses her native tongue constantly and is aware of the students doing the same. Instead of avoiding translation she advocates for embracing it to improve learners' English skills.

Ekaterina

Like Karina and Lyudmila, Ekaterina commented that grammar was challenging for her students and that they lacked morphological knowledge. She noted,

> I want my students to understand that grammar is like a puzzle; you put all the pieces together and get a beautiful picture. But to put the pieces together you must know what pieces fit together. That is why I always review speech parts and how to use them and transform them.

A lecturer at a university with relative freedom in planning her lessons, Ekaterina allocated enough time to review parts of speech because she believed it could improve her students' academic writing, which was the main focus of her class. She regretted, however, that because she had to follow a target language-only classroom policy within a communicative language teaching framework, promoted by the university, she could not use Japanese the way she wanted. Ekaterina commented that

> Students, especially freshmen, didn't understand the difference between spoken and written English. If only I could teach them academic English, phrases with their Japanese equivalents, translate their writing and demonstrate how ridiculous they sound, they would get it right away and never repeat the same mistake.

Ekaterina believes that comparing languages by using translation is beneficial for the students as they then realise how they actually sound in a foreign language. She asserted that learners want to express their identity in a foreign language the same way they do in their native tongue. For example, university students

want to sound like young people, not middle-aged people, nor like children. Translation helps them find or keep searching for the exact words or expressions they want to use. Writing a university paper triggers the same mechanism, as no student wants his or her paper to sound like a joke to the professor.

All three teachers shared a strong belief that their students lack knowledge of grammar, especially morphology, and commented on the necessity for explicit grammar instruction. They also perceived translation as a positive phenomenon that occurs naturally and should be embraced in order to enhance learners' English proficiency. Overall, the teachers had positive views of the role that learners' native tongue plays in the classroom, beliefs that are in accordance with the Russian theoretical framework of TFL.

What Teachers Do

The teachers were asked to share their educational practices and the methods and techniques that they find useful and apply constantly. These techniques were analysed and put into groups according to underlying principles identified by the author. These principles will be presented and explained together with the example activities provided by the teachers.

Provide Cognitive Investment

The teachers commented that they were constantly building learners' knowledge of English, such as vocabulary, grammar, and politeness, choosing activities that were cognitively challenging for their students. To teach new vocabulary, Karina and Lyudmila often use their own background knowledge to elicit vocabulary from the students. While discussing types of companies, they might ask a question such as "What kind of company is Sony?" so as to elicit words like *electronics* and *manufacturing company*. Lyudmila mentioned that she frequently asks for definitions, for example, "What is *shichi-go-san*?" and "What does being punctual mean in Japan?" She requires her students to frame their definitions so they would be comprehensive and laconic and define the same part of speech used in the original question: "*Shichi-go-san* is a festival" and "Being punctual means arriving 10 minutes before."

All three teachers also mentioned that they teach spelling patterns and phonics explicitly and focus on the notion of politeness, while emphasising the similarities between English and Japanese. As an example, Karina brought up a short dialogue that she would often have with her students:

Karina: When you meet someone for the first time, what do you say in Japanese?

Student: *Hajimemashite*.

Karina: Right. In English, we say "How do you do?" Do you answer "I am doing fine" to *hajimemashite*?

Student: No, we repeat *hajimemashite*.

Karina: Exactly. In English, it is the same, we repeat "How do you do?"

Through this dialogue Karina managed to introduce a phrase in English with its equivalent in Japanese without going into further explanation of its use. According to Karina this always saved time and kept it easy and simple for beginner students.

The teachers saw that their mission in developing students' cognitive abilities was to analyse and compare languages, instead of merely introducing vocabulary and grammar patterns.

Provide Affective Investment

The teachers noted that in general their students had low confidence and so they made sure their lessons provided plenty of

opportunities for personal development and confidence building. Karina mentioned that she always includes some English words borrowed from Japanese, such as *karaoke* and *sake*, and explains to the students it is all right to use them. Lyudmila always repeats to the students that "no perfect English exists" and "even native speakers can be wrong," while being open about being a nonnative teacher. She always brings a dictionary to the lesson and says, "Let's find out together," when asked about some particularly tricky vocabulary or grammar rule.

Ekaterina said that teaching university students in their 2nd and 3rd year made her change the curriculum slightly and she introduced a unit titled "Future Choices: Academia or Immediate Employment," in which she consulted students about the possibilities of continuing their studies or finding a job in domestic or international companies, all while teaching relevant vocabulary. She said she spent a lesson talking about the difference between *scholarship* and *shogakukin* (奨学金) while searching on the web for scholarship information with the students; one of the written assignments was to write a resume and a cover letter in English and compare it with the typical Japanese *rirekisho* (履歴書, resume) and *sofujo* (送付状, cover letter).

Improve Academic Abilities

All three teachers mentioned their students' poor note-taking skills and described some techniques that they used to improve them. Karina and Lyudmila teach their students how to organise vocabulary lists, with no more than five relevant words, for example, *fee*, *charge*, *tuition*, *rate*, and *fare* in one list, or write verbs together with prepositions.

Ekaterina has used Shatalov's (1987) conspectus (supporting scheme or resume) method that proposed creating an outline for every topic. This outline cannot be longer than a page and must list key words and grammar of the lesson, major conclusions written in a concise way, and examples set out in a definite order; it must be color-coded and have arrows signifying the links and connections. This method is somewhat similar to Buzan and Buzan's (2010) mind maps in terms of creating a unique, visually interesting outline. While Buzan and Buzan proposed mind maps with adult business people in mind, Shatalov focused on middle school pupils and did not encourage students to create their own conspectuses, recognising that it can be a difficult and time-consuming task. Instead, he encouraged students to listen and follow the discussion during the lesson and learn from the teacher's conspectus how to organise their vocabulary and grammar knowledge as well as how to present this knowledge in a concise manner. Ekaterina believed that her university students had characteristics of both middle school children and adult learners so she tried to blend Shatalov's and Buzans' methods. She would write her conspectus on the board and encourage students to make any changes they wanted, add Japanese words if necessary, and use colour and symbols that were meaningful to them. Ekaterina commented that every class and every student had their unique conspectus/mind map quite different from hers. She encouraged her students to keep and use them for reviewing and preparing for mid-term and end-of-term tests.

Invest in Bilingual Identity and Nurture Bilingual Skills

Being trilingual themselves, the teachers commented that codeswitching skills between English and Japanese were crucial for their students as these were, as Karina put it, "exactly the kind of skills they (students) will need at work in the future." Karina pointed out that codeswitching is not a mechanical translation of words and phrases; it includes thinking about the most effective and appropriate way to convey the message. She said that her students needed to learn not only vocabulary or grammar patterns but also ways to organise their thoughts and develop their narration to be comprehensible to the audience. When

thinking about the intended audience, the students require cultural knowledge as well, and, according to Karina, this makes the lesson more communicative and interesting; the aim is to develop codeswitching skills.

Referring to her own learning experience, Lyudmila commented that codeswitching skills "do not appear magically overnight." She said that special activities are needed to create links between the languages and it involves hard work for both teachers and students. As examples of such activities, Lyudmila mentioned the following: making a presentation in English while looking at the power point slides in Japanese; discussing the milestones of the company where the student works, using information from the company's homepage in Japanese; and researching about some topic specific to Japan so the students research about it in Japanese first and then present in English to their best ability, explicitly asking for vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, and proverb equivalents in Japanese. Despite the fact that Lyudmila's pedagogical practices were reminiscent of Cen Williams's translanguaging pedagogy (cited in Baker, 2001), she herself never mentioned this term and when asked directly, replied that she was unaware of the term.

The teachers also mentioned that bilingual persons should be aware of their own accent and be able to understand and hear different accents in English. Lyudmila taught her students both American and British standards of English and Karina introduced the accents of Spanish, French, Indian, and Russian speakers of English. She commented that it was a quite rewarding experience as the majority of her students were excited to learn about different accents, because they mostly had opportunities to communicate with nonnative English speakers. They gladly shared their own experiences of being exposed to *Singlish* (Singaporean English), Malaysian English, and Thai English, which made them active participants of the lesson. Karina also mentioned that slowly her students realised that they did not need to have native-speaker-like English to be understood and this in turn helped them to build their confidence and take pride in their Japanese accent.

Conclusions and Implications

The results of this exploratory study seem to indicate that the teachers' beliefs concerning learners' native tongue were not influenced by the controversy typical of Anglo-American academic literature and are supported by their knowledge of Russian school theoretical framework which perceives the native tongue positively and advocates for its active use during the lesson. The teachers' educational practices included implicit and explicit use of Japanese language and culture to encourage students to refer to their L1 even when the basic mode of the lesson was English. The teachers used their cultural and professional competence to invest in the students' cognitive, affective, and academic development to help them overcome their insecurities and they also tried to provide the students with the opportunities to make first steps towards becoming bilingual.

Future research on this topic might include classroom observations, in-depth interviews, and some form of qualitative research to get Japanese students' feedback on English lessons conducted by the Russian teachers. It might also be worth investigating how Japanese teachers of English perceive such educational practices and whether they share similar beliefs and attitudes regarding the learners' L1.

The implications of this study include an urgent need for further research, based on various epistemological traditions, including academic studies from Eastern Europe, Asia, and Latin America, about optimal use of Japanese in the English classroom. As this study has shown, the Russian teachers had a unique view of EFL in Japan and interesting ideas about blending TESOL and bilingual pedagogy, creation of bilingual materi-

als, and the place of translation in the field of TEFL. It cannot be argued that all Russian teachers of English share the views demonstrated through this small-scale research. The researcher can only invite fellow-researchers to explore further the Russian TFL theoretical framework that has not yet been analysed in-depth. Reviewing (and translating) relevant TFL literature can be a starting point for educators and academics to broaden the discussion, reflect on their own beliefs and teaching practices, and find possible alternatives.

Bio Data

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