

Shared Identities: Our Interweaving Threads

The L1 in the L2 classroom: University EFL teacher perceptions

Brian McMillan

Hiroshima Bunkyo Women's University

Damian J. Rivers

Kanda University of International Studies

Tony Cripps

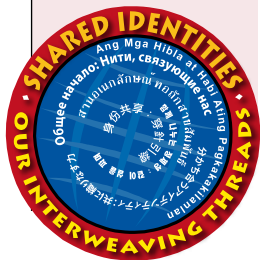
Ritsumeikan University

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Since the advent of communicative-style language teaching, codeswitching between the target language (TL) and the students' first language (L1) has been widely viewed as either counterproductive to the learning process, or as an unfortunate but sometimes necessary recourse. In much of the SLA literature the proponents of TL exclusivity have either discouraged use of the L1, or have simply treated it as a non-issue by omitting any reference to it (Cook, 2001). Recently, however, a growing number of researchers have made strong arguments in favour of a limited, but positive role for the learner's L1 in the second language (L2) classroom. This article documents an attitudinal survey of native English speaking teachers at a Japanese university where TL exclusivity is promoted as a key feature of the optimal language learning environment.

コミュニケーション・スタイルを用いた言語指導が始まって以来、目標言語(TL)と生徒の第一言語(L1)との切り替えは学習過程にとって逆効果でありながら、そうせざるを得ないと考えられていた。第二言語習得法(SLA)の論文の多くは、目標言語(TL)支持者が、学生に第一言語(L1)の使用を勧めないか、または単にそれについての言及を省くことによって、問題として取り上げないでいる(Cook,2001)。しかしながら、近来、ますます多くの研究者たちが、第二言語(L2)の学習の場での学習者の第一言語(L1)使用の有効な側面を評価し、推奨している。この論文は、目標言語(TL)の独占的な使用が任意の言語学習環境として推奨されている日本の大学での英語のネイティブスピーカー教員が行った調査を記録したものである。



The main theoretical argument which underlies TL exclusivity in L2 teaching is the L1 = L2 learning hypothesis (Ellis, 1986; Gass & Selinker, 1994; Krashen, 1981), which states that L2 acquisition takes place in much the same way that children acquire their L1. To a large degree, young children learn their L1 without being explicitly taught words and grammar rules. Rather, L1 acquisition takes place implicitly or incidentally, as well as through inferencing and hypothesis testing. Monolingual L1 learners make no reference to any other language; thus, if L2 learning is equivalent to L1 learning, there should be no need for L2 rules to be explicitly taught for conscious learning, and there should be no need to provide L2 learners with translations for unknown L2 words or to compare L1 and L2 structures.

Krashen (1981, 1985) advanced the notion that L2 acquisition takes place subconsciously through exposure to comprehensible input ($i + 1$) in the TL, with the learner focusing on meaning rather than form. In response to this overemphasis on subconscious acquisition, a number of authors have argued in favour of the role of conscious knowledge in L2 learning. Long (1990) argues that “the need for awareness and/or attention to language form for the learning of some aspects of a SL means that a theory that holds all language learning to be unconscious is inadequate” (p. 660). The variable competence theory (Adair-Hauck & Donato, 1994, p. 534) “acknowledges the interplay of controlled/conscious and automatic/subconscious cognitive processes of the learner” – thus recognizing the importance of both explicit instruction and implicit learning through communicative interaction.

The idea that TL exclusivity constitutes best practice has been a prevailing view in the field over much of the past hundred years (Cook, 2005). However, several authors (e.g., Atkinson, 1995; Cook, 2001) have suggested that the TL-only approach may have received such widespread support because “the proponents of these theories simply did not speak the first language of their subjects or students” (Macaro, 2005, p. 66). Atkinson (1995, para. 3) contends that western ELT “has tended to deprive students of the opportunity to develop their knowledge of the L2 through comparison and contrast of it with their L1 by downplaying the role of the L1 in the learning process.” Of course, many second and foreign language teachers do recognize the pedagogical value of judicious L1 use. Barker (2003, para. 3) reports that there now appears to be a “gradual move... away from the ‘English only’ dogma that has long been a part of the British and American ELT movement.”

The function of the L1 in L2 learning

Contrary to the L1 = L2 learning hypothesis, the learner’s L1 has indeed been shown to play an important role in L2 learning (Ringbom, 1987; Van Lier, 1995). According to a cognitive perspective, L2 learners are seen as actively and consciously using a variety of mental strategies. Based on their perception of the transferability of linguistic elements, learners use their L1 to make predictions about what works in the L2 (Gass & Selinker, 1994). Van Lier (1995) states: “Learning is a process of relating the new to the known, and language learning is no exception... Our strategies and conscious learning actions are greatly assisted if we can connect the known (L1) to the new (L2) in a principled,

realistic manner” (p. 39); he further asserts that “no one has been able to show, to my knowledge, that problems caused by L1-L2 related phenomena can be dealt with more efficiently by ‘hiding’ the L1 than by encouraging students to consciously examine both languages in order to determine where the problems lie” (p. 40). Spada and Lightbown (1999, cited in Macaro, 2005, p. 75), and Calvé (1993) agree that codeswitching can be used to give learners negative evidence of the direct transferability of certain L1 structures into the L2.

Cook (2001) suggests that the L1 and L2 are connected in the learner’s mind in many ways: in vocabulary, in syntax, in phonology, and in pragmatics. Skinner (1985, cited in Macaro, 2001) argues that exclusive use of the L2 can hamper connections between the TL and prior knowledge and ideas already developed in the L1. Many theorists now agree that “the language of thought for all but the most advanced L2 learners is inevitably his/her L1” (Macaro, 2005, p. 68).

Teachers who follow a communicatively-framed approach seek to maximize opportunities for students to use the TL while carrying out meaningful tasks, often involving pair and group work. Most of the early studies based on interaction (see Pica, 1994, for a review) focused on how TL input is negotiated and made comprehensible by learners interacting through the TL; the usefulness of codeswitching was downplayed. Negotiation of meaning in the TL may indeed provide feedback and comprehensible input for acquisition, and “some of the most effective L2 experiences for learners will take place during such moments” (Chaudron, 1993, cited in Auerbach, 1994). However, as many EFL teachers

will attest, students, especially at beginner and intermediate levels, will often switch between the TL and their L1 when working collaboratively and policing the entire class to discourage L1 use can be a trying task.

More recently, several studies have used sociocultural theory and a Vygotskian analysis of verbal interaction (emphasizing the interrelatedness of speech and thought) to examine learner use of the L1 as a cognitive tool in carrying out collaborative tasks. This L1 use is especially prevalent amongst learners with a low level of TL proficiency dealing with challenging tasks and content. In one such study, Brooks and Donato (1994) analyzed the speech of secondary-level learners of Spanish working on a problem-solving speaking task. They observed that less proficient learners used their L1 in order to manage the task and their exchanges in the TL. They suggest that some use of the L1 during L2 interaction “is a normal psycholinguistic process that facilitates L2 production and allows the learners both to initiate and sustain verbal interaction with one another” (p. 268; see also Antòn & DiCamilla, 1998; Behan, Turnbull & Spek, 1997; Swain & Lapkin, 2000).

Liebscher and Dailey-O’Cain (2004) report on advanced level university students who, with no constraints put on L1 use, used the L1 for L2 repair and also used codeswitching like bilinguals in the real world. The authors conclude that “when there is a shared understanding among both student and teacher that, in addition to learning the subject matter, one of the main goals is L2 use, permission to use the L1 can be granted without fear of jeopardizing the language learning endeavour through overuse of the L1” (pp. 519-520). They suggest that as students developed their own codeswitching

patterns, the need for teacher L1 use was significantly diminished; they also call for more research to determine how beginners can be instructed to use codeswitching as a resource.

Teacher beliefs regarding language usage in the classroom

In a review of previous studies on teachers' beliefs concerning TL and L1 use, Macaro (2001) concludes that none of the studies found a majority of teachers in favour of banning the L1 completely, while in all studies teachers expected the majority of interaction to be in the TL. Teachers mainly used the L1 for giving instructions for complex activities, relationship building, control and management, teaching grammar explicitly, and providing brief L1-TL (or TL-L1) equivalents. Major factors determining the amount of L1 use were level of proficiency and time pressures. Many teachers said they would like to use 100% TL, but that either external factors were getting in the way, or they felt that they lacked the skill necessary to stay in the TL; many teachers also reported feeling guilty when they used the L1. Rather than aiming for TL exclusivity, Macaro (2005) suggests that at least 85-90% of teacher talk should be in the TL, while Atkinson (1987) argues that about 95% TL use may be most beneficial.

One of the primary justifications often given for maximizing teacher TL use is to encourage student TL use. However, Macaro's (2001) study with pre-service teachers found no correlation between teacher use of L1 and the use of L1 by beginner and lower-intermediate learners. Furthermore, no significant increase in student TL use was

found when the teacher used the TL exclusively or almost exclusively. Macaro asserts that "codeswitching by the teacher has no negative impact on the quantity of students' L2 production and that 'expert codeswitching' may actually increase and improve it" (2005, p. 72; see also Butzkamm, 1998; McMillan & Turnbull, in press; Pellowe, 1998).

In consideration of the research reviewed above, the current research project aims to assess teachers' attitudes toward teacher and student TL and L1 usage within a communicative language teaching environment.

Methodology

The participants in this research project were native-speaking English teachers at a Japanese university. The teachers, as well as their students, are expected to follow a TL-only classroom policy which is promoted by the university within a communicative language teaching (CLT) framework. The classes which these teachers teach include both task-based and content-based lessons on a wide range of stimulating topics. The teachers have a good degree of autonomy in their adaptation of materials and their subsequent enactment within the classroom. The participants in the current project had a mean total of 6.5 years experience teaching EFL, 3.9 years of which had been in Japan; they had been teaching at the university in question for an average of 2.1 years. In terms of teaching qualifications all teachers possessed a language related M.A. or higher.

During the spring semester of 2008 a call for volunteers was put out to all full-time native English speaking teachers. Each teacher was sent a URL link to an online survey which

featured six open-ended questions related to various teaching issues within their work environment. Due to the fact that language policy was considered a sensitive issue at this institution, it was felt that the anonymity of an online survey would encourage teachers to answer honestly according to their personal beliefs. The researchers also felt that open-ended questions would produce the most honest, self-driven answers by allowing the participants maximum freedom without guiding them toward any pre-assumed conclusions. After four weeks, a 54% response rate had been attained and the decision was made to begin the data analysis. For the purpose of this paper only three of the six questions will be focused upon:

- (1) Based on your experiences as a teacher, how do you feel about the use of the students' L1 when used by the teacher?
- (2) Based on your experiences as a teacher, how do you feel about the use of the students' L1 when used by the student?
- (3) Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement and explain your answer in relation to your own knowledge and beliefs.

“Within an EFL classroom, using a ‘communicative approach’ requires that the teacher and students use the TL only.”

Results and discussion

For questions (1) and (2), the researchers classified each response as either viewing L1 use positively or negatively

through a process of keyword and sentence-level analysis. A number of teachers hedged their answers, providing mixed responses; these responses were assigned to a third category, labeled “partially positive.” Similarly, for question (3), responses that did not clearly agree or disagree with the statement were assigned to a third category, “agree somewhat.”

In response to question (1) 42% of the teachers held distinctly negative views on the use of the students' L1 within the classroom; 16% of the teachers held a partially positive view and the remaining 42% held a positive view of L1 use by the teacher. In response to question (2) 38% of the teachers held a negative view toward the students using their L1 in the classroom; 24% held a partially positive view and the remaining 38% of the teachers held a positive view of L1 usage by the students.

As for the third question, 17% agreed that using a “communicative approach” requires that the teacher and students use the TL only; 28% agreed somewhat with this statement, and the remaining 55% disagreed.

Several teachers who viewed teacher L1 use negatively felt that remaining in the TL led to more negotiation in the TL. One teacher commented: *The L1 may speed up explanations, classroom management, etc. but the possible extra time and repetition needed for doing everything in the TL is time and effort well spent.* Other teachers indicated that their negative view of teacher L1 use was based on their own experience as an L2 learner, with one teacher responding: *The L1 shouldn't be used at all. When I was a student, anyone speaking English (L1) at all put me off altogether.* Referring back to one's own L2 learning experiences, or apprenticeship of

observation (Lortie, 1975), can be an important factor in shaping teachers' beliefs and practice. However, it should be recognized that different learners have different learning styles and different preferences regarding TL and L1 use (Macaro, 2005).

A number of the teachers also expressed concern that any amount of teacher L1 use would cause the student L1 floodgates to open. One teacher commented: *In general, I dislike it when the teacher speaks in the students' L1 within the classroom. I feel that this demonstrates to the students that it is then OK to use Japanese.* Two teachers responded that they were against any teacher use of the L1, except on very rare occasions when used for comic relief. One teacher said: *If done in a comical manner on occasion, students will appreciate the teacher as a "clown" in their L1. When used to clarify for other communicative ends, I feel the students would rather the teacher utilize English only.*

Those who believed that the teacher's L1 could play a positive role commented on issues associated with efficiency, clarity, understanding, and students' prior language learning experiences and level. One teacher stated: *I use it sometimes when it helps illustrate a point or can explain a word better. It's infrequent, but I'm only interested in whether the cat catches the mouse, not so much whether the cat speaks English to do it.* Another teacher commented: *In some instances I feel the L1 is appropriate. I do not believe the English-only policy is appropriate for Japan considering the current methodology employed at the junior/high school levels in Japan.*

Several teachers held very negative views of student L1 use. One teacher commented: *In my department, there is*

only a little use of students' L1 by weaker students. Another teacher responded: *The use of the L1 should be strongly discouraged. Any use of the L1 should be initiated by the teacher in all but the most extreme circumstances.*

More favourable views of student L1 use included: *I expect that students will need to use small amounts of L1 to help each other – especially lower-proficiency students. I tell students that they can use Japanese if it helps them to understand/use more English. A simple Japanese translation can save extensive time and frustration on the part of the student. I sometimes ask students for the Japanese of a vocabulary item as a very simple and quick comprehension check. Written Japanese may be used in note-taking.* Other teachers acknowledged the difficulties of maintaining an English-only classroom: *Depending on the environment in the school, an English-only policy may be difficult to enforce, but I think it's the teacher's job to encourage "English-mainly" in the classroom.*

With regard to teacher perceptions of CLT, several of the teachers who agreed that the L1 should have no role to play expressed the belief that remaining in the TL would promote negotiation of meaning and the use of strategies such as circumlocution and asking for clarification: *I generally agree – using the TL encourages use of communication strategies. Use of L1 is often the thin edge of the wedge.* Other teachers identified the influence of other parties in their approach to the issue: *Perhaps. In the case of this university I get the feeling that we are supposed to use English only as we are selling a product which the university has promoted and essentially sold to students – that being native speaker English interaction.*

Those teachers who “agreed somewhat” tended to think that using the TL only was generally a good idea, but agreed that in certain situations use of the L1 could be helpful: *Yes, once students are adept enough in the TL to run the classroom in it (after say a semester of learning), then the class needs to be in the TL as much as possible. However, sometimes dipping into the L1 resource is beneficial – but it should be done infrequently.* Others cited problems with communication breakdown: *I do think the idea should be English only – the problem arises when students are not able to express what they’re trying to express in English. Then communication breaks down. I think the odd L1 word is OK in this situation.*

The teacher-participants who disagreed with the idea that using English only was a requirement of CLT made comments such as: *It depends on the situation. With advanced learners, the use of the L1 may not be necessary. With lower-level learners, some L1 communication may facilitate L2 learning; and; I think it’s more a continuum than a zero sum game. If I understand a student who is communicating in Japanese who otherwise couldn’t express himself in English, I respond in English normally without telling the student to only speak English. I think it’s a bit harsh and counterproductive to ignore a student’s utterances in the L1 if he/she is unable to produce them in the TL. It can become an offhand needs assessment to see what they need to work on.*

As this last teacher suggests, TL and L1 use is best viewed as a continuum. An English only (EO) policy leads to a dichotomy wherein using English only is extolled as best practice and any amount of L1 use is portrayed as a

hindrance to the language learning process. As Critchley (2002) points out, a language use scale is a more appropriate and useful tool for considering language choice in the classroom.

Regarding the situation at the institution where the present study was conducted, further research is needed in the form of classroom observations and in-depth interviews with teachers to determine where these teachers’ beliefs originate and what these teachers and their students are actually doing within the classroom.

Conclusion

The long-held belief that the exclusive use of the TL constitutes best practice continues to enjoy acceptance among many second and foreign language educators. As Atkinson (1995, para. 4) points out, it is still the case that “in many contexts overuse of the L1 is still the biggest barrier to really effective language teaching.” A case in point is the recent announcement made by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) aimed at increasing the communicative English abilities of Japanese high school students. The proposed mandate states that from 2013 all high school English lessons are to be taught “in principle” through English only, although grammatical explanations may still be given in Japanese.

However, while most language educators would agree that the TL should be used for the vast majority of classroom communication, Atkinson (1987) suggests that it is going too far to say that English should “always be the only language used in every classroom” (p. 242). There is considerable

research evidence which shows that judicious L1 use can lead to the counterintuitive situation in which the quantity and quality of TL use may actually be improved (Macaro, 2005). This is especially true for intermediate and beginner-level classes in which students share a common L1. Teachers and administrators may worry that if given the proverbial inch, students will take an L1 mile. This is certainly a legitimate concern; however, students are likely to use small amounts of the L1 even with an EO policy in place, and a strictly enforced EO policy may act to silence the potential benefits of pedagogically principled L1 use.

When working under a “one-size-fits-all” TL only policy, teachers may feel pressure to exclude the L1 from the classroom based on the expected reactions of “important others” such as students, colleagues, and administrators (Kennedy & Kennedy, 1996). In such cases some teachers are faced with the choice of following a policy that they do not agree with, or going against the policy in order to follow an approach to TL and L1 use which is congruent with their beliefs. Furthermore, other teachers may feel inadequate in upholding the policy when in fact such an approach may be unrealistic and some mixture of TL and L1 use might actually lead to greater learning achievement.

A professional development-action research approach (see Atkinson, 1995; Van Lier, 1995; Macaro, 2000, 2001) would affirm the ability of teachers and students to develop their own localized strategies for maximizing TL comprehension and use. These strategies may well include small amounts of L1 use in some stages of the lesson, while some lessons, or parts thereof, may be conducted entirely in the TL. Such an approach would promote teacher and learner autonomy

and would acknowledge that specific teaching situations (e.g., student proficiency level, lesson content, task type), and teacher/learner preferences can be very different. By reviewing the relevant literature, discussing the issue with colleagues, analyzing TL and L1 use in their own classes and reflecting on the effectiveness of their own strategies and possible alternatives, teachers can develop a personalized approach which they feel best meets the needs of their students. In this way, as Farrell (1998, p. 10) moots, they may also “experience and enjoy a new level of self-articulated professionalism.”

Brian McMillan is a lecturer at Hiroshima Bunkyo Women’s University. His research interests include teacher and learner autonomy and the role of the L1 in L2 learning. <peibrian@gmail.com>

Damian J. Rivers is a lecturer at Kanda University of International Studies and a PhD candidate researching Japanese ethnolinguistic identity and L2 learner motivation. <damian-r@kanda.kuis.ac.jp> <<http://www.eapstudy.com>>

Tony Cripps is a professor at Ritsumeikan University and holds a doctorate in TEFL. His research interests include learner autonomy, computer assisted language learning (CALL), curriculum design and the development of innovative teaching material. <cripps@ec.ritsumei.ac.jp>

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