<Research Note>

Students' First Language (L1) Use in the English Classroom

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Introduction

Students' L1 use in the language classroom has long been the subject of debate. Various research has been conducted on such issues as: How much L1 is (or should be) used in a classroom by the teacher or students; What are the aims of and reasons for L1 use; and How do teachers and students evaluate their L1 use? These studies are meaningful to find the optimal balance between the L1 and L2 in a language teaching and learning situation. It is an urgent task for the English teachers in Japanese schools, as well, to examine these issues for reasons I will elaborate here.

English education in Japan in general has been going through various changes for the last couple of decades. For instance, the traditional grammar translation method has been replaced by communicative approach, particularly at junior high schools. It is true that quite a large number of English classrooms in high schools, in order to prepare students for university entrance examination, still strictly adhere to the grammar translation method, where the instructions and activities are mainly in the L1 and little L2 production or communication is encouraged. However, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology recently announced new teaching guidelines that recommend conducting high-school English lessons mainly in English. Moreover, primary English education now begins at the elementary school level, for fifth- and sixth-graders.

Such changes seem geared toward more oral production, native-like pronunciation, and elimination of students' L1, which is viewed as a barrier to English learning. But are these rational goals for all teachers and students in Japan to aim for? Are there enough empirical studies to support the claim that the domination

of L2 (and exclusion of L1) is more effective for language learning? Does this even correspond to the worldwide trend toward globalization?

In light of such questions, I cannot completely approve of the current trends of English education in Japan. When it comes to Japanese schools, where the majority of students share their L1 and are learning English as a foreign language, it seems more useful and practical to utilize students' L1 even partially for instruction to enhance their learning as well as to minimize the possible stress of learning a foreign language. Therefore, it seems valuable to examine the issue of students' L1 use in a language classroom from various perspectives in order to seek an ideal direction for language learning and teaching.

Bearing this objective in mind, here I will discuss the issue of L1 use with regard to the following four aspects: methodological, cognitive, pedagogical, and sociolinguistic; followed, conclusion, by my suggestions regarding the future of language education.

I. Methodological Aspect

> With a few exceptions, the majority of teaching methods from the direct method to the audio-lingual method, to task-based learning, has insisted that the less the first language is used in the classroom, the better the teaching (Cook, 2008, p.180).

I want to begin by considering how students' L1 has been treated in various teaching methods, while referring to the categorization of Larsen-Freeman (2000, p.178) as a framework of the history of language teaching methods.

One of the most well-known methods is the "grammar-translation method," which involves the teacher having students translate a text into their L1 so that they can learn how to read literature in the target language (TL); another goal of this teaching method is to cultivate students' minds. As a result of learning the TL, the students are expected to improve their own L1 grammar, and speaking/writing skills. In other words, L1 is used as the main source of input by the teacher as well as output by the students. Therefore, little L2 production was encouraged during lessons.

The second key teaching method is the "direct method," which focuses on

students' learning spoken language (oral communication). To attain this goal, the teacher is required to convey the meaning of the TL through demonstrations or visuals aids. At the same time, the students are encouraged to produce ample output in the TL. Consequently, no L1 use was allowed during lessons.

The third method is the "audio-lingual method" (ALM), which was strongly influenced by structural linguistics and behavioral psychology. This method calls on students to memorize sentences and sound patterns to form new habits. One of the differences from the direct method is that the students are expected to become an "automatic" user of those sentence patterns. Hence, the drills and pattern practices are repeated for a long time orally and aurally. In order to "form a new habit" of TL, it is necessary to "overcome" the L1 habits thought to interfere with TL learning. Naturally, L1 use is banned completely during lessons. At the same time, the teacher is required to prevent the L1 interference from occurring as much as possible based on the knowledge of the contrastive analysis.

The fourth method is the "silent way." Ever since the emergence of this method, L1 use gradually started to be treated differently. That is, the individual student's own learning process—such as discovering language rules or making errors as a result of testing their hypothesis about the TL—started to become more accepted or even encouraged. In the silent way, language learning is thought to involve "rule formation"—rather than the "habit formation" proposed by ALM. In other words, students are encouraged to discover grammar rules by themselves by developing "inner criteria for correctness." For this purpose, the teacher's talk needs to be limited. If necessary, L1 is allowed for providing instructions or feedback. Since this method focuses on learning pronunciation, L1 or L1 knowledge is also utilized to improve the students' pronunciation.

The fifth method is "desuggestopedia" (or "suggestopedia"), which pays more attention to students' state of mind during the lessons, based on the idea that a "psychological barrier" to language learning can discourage a student from learning effectively. In order to overcome this barrier, the teacher introduces meaningful texts to the students in a friendly atmosphere. L1 is used to translate the meaning of texts. Although L1 is allowed to be used if necessary, the use should be gradually decreased.

The sixth method is the "community language learning method," which also emphasizes the importance of students' feeling. The teacher is thus expected to

behave like a “language counselor” who can understand students’ frustration through the course of language learning and provide them with a sense of security. Compared to children, adult language learners tend to be afraid of experiencing a new learning environment. Therefore, the L1 can be utilized to reassure students by connecting their existing L1 knowledge and experiences to the new world of the TL. The literal L1 translations to the TL words are provided to the students so that they can produce new sentences in the TL. The L1 is also used for giving directions or for sharing students’ feelings, though it is expected to decrease gradually as lessons progress.

The seventh method the “comprehension approach,” which includes the “natural approach,” the “learnables,” and the “total physical response.” What these approaches have in common is an emphasis on the importance of listening comprehension. Students are expected to understand the meaning of aural input without the medium of the L1. Consequently, it is acceptable for students to delay their oral production until they are ready. Therefore, L1 is used only minimally at the beginning stage. For the rest of the lessons, no L1 is allowed, and the teacher needs to convey the meaning via body language or some visual aids.

The eighth method is the “communicative approach,” which aims for students to interact with other people in the TL in a social context. Toward this end, it is not enough to master the linguistic structure of the TL; students must also learn how communication functions by using the TL in meaningful contexts (such as information-gap activities, role playing, and games). Therefore, L1 is limited to only judicious uses, and all the communicative activities and the teacher’s instructions should be conducted in the TL.

The ninth type of method includes the “content-based approach,” the “task-based approach,” and the “project-based approach,” which all aim to have students use the TL to learn about a particular subject or accomplish a particular task. According to Madrid (2001), L1 should not, in principle, be used as a reference under this method. However, if students’ proficiency is not high enough, the L1 can be used; although its use should be reduced gradually as the students’ level improves (pp.105–106). Similarly, the project-based approach, which includes various tasks under a project, emphasizes the primary use the TL, but the L1 can be used in the early stages of the project so that the students can develop their cognitive foundation to promote the project.

The tenth category is “learning strategy training” and the “cooperative learning”

(also called "collaborative learning"). Learning strategy training focuses on raising students' awareness of their own learning and introducing techniques used by "good language learners." Since it is considered to be important to introduce learning strategies from an early stage, the L1 use is inevitable when the students' proficiency is not high enough "to understand the explanations of why and how to use learning strategies" (Chamot, 2005, p.122) in the TL. In the case of cooperative learning, students are expected to learn from each other through group works, and the teacher's role is to instruct the students how to work together efficiently. As long as it facilitates collaboration among students, the L1 use does not seem to be limited so strictly.

The majority of language teaching methods, as Cook claims (2008, p.180), emphasize the primary use of the TL—except for the Grammar-translation method; and L1 use is completely eliminated in the direct method and the audio-lingual method. However, when second language acquisition research started to focus more on the individual student's cognitive/psychological aspects as well as on the social context of communication, L1 use in the language classroom has gradually gained acceptance to some extent. This means that L1 use is approved when it facilitates TL learning, helps students to prepare for the main activities using TL, or makes up for their lack of proficiency. Therefore it seems safe to say that, except some extreme cases, TL use is ideal or preferable most of the time, but L1 use is considered "unavoidable" to some extent. This word, "unavoidable" suggests the general attitude toward the L1 in language classrooms, which is far from positive. In my opinion, however, there seems to be more ways to utilize the students' L1. In the following section, I would like to examine various ideas and research results that verify advantages of L1 use.

II. Cognitive Aspect

Kern (1994) defines the idea of "mental translation" as processing TL expressions into the L1 in the course of L2 reading (p.442). The advantages of this type of L1 use are to "reduce working memory constraints, avoid losing track of the meaning of the text, consolidate meaning in long term memory, convert the input into more familiar terms (thereby reducing anxiety), clarify the syntactic roles of certain lexical items" (pp.449–453). According to this view, L1 use seems not only

to reduce the amount of cognitive load on the students while reading, but also to support the process of building meaning and understanding a text. This must be a great benefit for beginning-level or even intermediate-level students, who tend to get lost and to become frustrated while reading the L2 text.

With regard to vocabulary learning, some studies suggest the benefits of L1 use. When students learn new vocabulary using L1 equivalents, they can recall them better (see Brown & Perry, 1991; Lotto & de Groot, 1998). This seems related to the fact that it is difficult to memorize something without connecting new information to the existing knowledge in mind, as Cromley points out (2000, p. 4). Therefore, L1 use might play an anchoring role for this task.

In terms of TL production, Macaro (2005) claims that students can elaborate their ideas more accurately, and will also be more willing to take risks, when they are allowed to use the L1 (p. 77). This is because students can access the diverse knowledge and experiences stored in their L1, which can boost their confidence and motivation.

Regarding student collaboration, Storch & Wigglesworth (2003) conducted a study to examine students' L1 use during joint reconstruction and composition tasks. They showed that L1 can be a useful tool with regard to the following three aspects: enabling the students to take control of their given tasks; letting them engage with the task "at a higher cognitive level"; and encouraging them to help each other, which enhances their learning (p. 768). If the students are forced to use only the TL, they might end up having a pretty shallow discussion on the topic since they have a limited source of language tools; or they might miss a valuable learning opportunity without getting scaffolded help from the peers.

Similar results are reported by Antón and DiCamilla (1999) with respect to a collaborative writing task. They state, based on their research, that the students use their L1 "as a critical psychological tool" which helps them to have "collaborative dialogue" in order to complete the task. They also claim that since language and thought are deeply connected to each other, and language facilitates one's own thinking "both within individuals and between individuals," banning the students' L1 means losing "two powerful tools for learning" (p. 245). If the teacher prohibits students from using the L1 in order to facilitate their TL use, it might interfere with the process and the completion of collaborative works among the students. It seems very unfortunate that the teacher's "good" intentions could lead to a such negative

learning result.

Another study, conducted by Hashim (2006), also supports the L1 use for student collaboration. According to his small-scale study of the students' L1 use during the collaborative reading task, Hashim points out that the students mainly used their L1 to figure out the difficult words or ideas in the text in order to maintain the dialog and complete the given task. Therefore, he suggests that judicious L1 use might be necessary for the students to complete the task and to learn from it.

As all of these research results suggest, it seems rational to make use of students' L1 partially during lessons, as long as it facilitates TL learning.

III. Pedagogical Aspect

Next, there is the question of how the "purpose" of teachers using the students L1, and the "quantity" of that usage, impacts learning. According to Macaro (2005), there are mainly five occasions for a teacher to use the L1: to build personal relationship with students; to explain complex procedure of an activity; to manage the class; to translate and to check students' comprehension to save time; and to provide explicit grammar instruction (p. 69). Cook (2008, p.184) also claims that the teacher should consider L1 use as beneficial when it "conveys meaning" (e.g., explaining grammar rules) and contributes to "organizing the class" (e.g., explaining tasks). Harbord (1992) points out three objectives of teachers' L1 use: facilitating teacher-student communication; facilitating teacher-student rapport; and facilitating learning (p. 352). These overlapping examples suggest that L1 use by the teacher aims to support TL learning cognitively and affectively, and to manage the class and time efficiently.

Various research has been conducted to examine the quantity of teacher's L1 use in classrooms. The results of each study vary considerably. For instance, Duff and Polio (1990) report that the teacher's L1 use in a foreign language classroom at the university level range from 0 to 90 %. According to Rolin-Ianziti and Brownlie (2002), average L1 use is 8.8% in the university-level French language classroom. Meanwhile, de la Campa and Nassaji (2009) examine L1 use by the experienced and novice German teachers in a university, and reveal an experienced teacher uses L1 words 9.3% of the time, while a novice teacher does so 13.2 % of the time (p. 749).

Although statistically there is no significant difference between the teachers with regard to the amount of L1 word use, their ways of using the L1 translation are significantly different (p. 756).

As these examples show, the quantity of the L1 use can differ widely depending on the students' proficiency, the goals of a lesson, or teacher's experience and beliefs. Therefore, it is extremely difficult to identify the optimal amount of L1 use which can be applied to any language classroom.

Regarding this question, Macaro suggests that if a teacher intends to communicate in the TL, the amount of L1 use should not exceed the threshold level (2005, p. 72), which appears to be about 5-15y, of the lesson according to his own study results (2001, p.537). Macaro also claims that the teachers can convey quite a large amount of information in the L1 in a short time, and that they can spare enough time for the TL activities (2005, p. 70). According to his argument, as long as the teacher's L1 use remains below 10% of the classroom discourse, there is "no significant increase" in the students' L1 use. At the same time, no empirical study has reported that the students' TL production is significantly increased due to the exclusive TL use by the teacher (Macaro, 2005, pp. 71–72). This view counters the criticism of L1 use by those who claim L1 should be eliminated in order to maximize TL use. Although further research is needed to determine the optimal balance of L1 and TL use, there seems to be ample pedagogical reasons to support teachers' partial L1 use during lessons.

IV. Sociolinguistic Aspect

Here I want to look at various factors surrounding English in the light of sociolinguistics, and to make some suggestions regarding the goal of English learning and teaching in Japan. Amidst the ongoing trend toward globalization, English has been considered as lingua franca (ELF), as Graddol elaborates:

> Unlike traditional EFL [English as a foreign language], ELF focuses also on pragmatic strategies required in intercultural communication. The target model of English, within the ELF framework, is not a native speaker but a fluent bilingual speaker, who retains a national identity in terms of accent, and who

also has the special skills required to negotiate understanding with another non-native speaker (2006, p. 87).

As this description shows, the role of English has been shifting from being the symbol of a dominant power (whether the United Kingdom or United States), toward becoming the common communication tool for everyone, especially among non-native speakers of English (NNSs). Graddol claims that people will have a much higher chance to communicate with NNSs than with native speakers (NSs) via ELF, according to the studies of demography and world economy (2006, p. 29). Therefore, the primary interlocutors of English has changed from NSs to NNSs. The other important change that Graddol points out is that the model of ELF learning is not a NS but a "fluent bilingual speaker," which makes a contrast to the goal of traditional English education.

V. Suggestions for a New Direction of English Education

1. Students' Goal

Considering these changes regarding the status of English and its users, it seems crucial to reconsider the goal of English education in general. If the traditional English teaching approach is applied, students have to suffer from a great discrepancy between the language classrooms and the real world. With regard to the English education in Japan, it is necessary for us, as NNSs, to clearly figure out what kind of goal we are aiming for, given the current situation. In light of this, I want to consider: What are the goals of Japanese students in English learning, and what kind of roles can Japanese teachers play in the course of English teaching?

In terms of the goals of Japanese students for English learning, as I noted in the introduction, Japanese students are learning EFL. The EFL situation in general involves little English input outside the classroom, and students face no urgent need to use English. Since students share their L1, they can easily communicate each other without relying on English. Therefore, it is extremely difficult to motivate the students to use English exclusively during lessons, especially when their proficiency level is not so high. Considering these situations, it is natural for Japanese students

not to be able use English fluently even after studying the language for six years in total at junior and senior high school.

Yet many people in Japan (including researchers, teachers, students and their parents) have been criticizing this poor result of English education and asking for a change. Some of the reforms advanced include an "English-only approach" at many universities, the introduction of English education at elementary schools, and new teaching guidelines at high schools calling for greater English use in the classroom.

It is clear that all these reforms are geared toward more oral production, native-like pronunciation, and even the elimination of the students' L1. I would like to state clearly here that I have no objection to the idea of encouraging students' English input and output to the greatest extent possible. Ideally, both students and teachers alike would be able to follow an English-only class with no difficulty. However, the reality is quite different. There are many students who are unable to participate in classroom activities because they fail to understand the instructions in English. Even if an activity is well-designed to promote the English use, it is useless without the participation of the students. Other students are overwhelmed by an English-only approach and frustrated by not having access to their best communication tool—their own L1. It seems unfortunate to discourage students' learning opportunities, both cognitively and affectively, due to a dogmatic belief regarding L2 use in the classroom.

Therefore, I would like to suggest an alternative goal for the Japanese students. That is, to become a "good L2 user"—to borrow an idea is presented by Cook (2008, p.15), along with his concept of "multi competence" (two languages exist in one mind). Cook claims that since L2 learners' minds are different from the mind of monolingual NSs (i.e., L2 learners have multi-competence), "it is inappropriate to base language teaching on the native speaker model" (2008, p.172). Traditionally, the goal of English learning was to become like a NS, which, however, never happens to the NNSs. When the students realize the impossibility of reaching this goal, they tend to be discouraged and frustrated about English learning. Some students are even ashamed of their existence as NNSs, underestimating their own identity or culture. This does not seem to be a sound attitude of learning. Instead, it is better for the students to aim to become a good L2 user, who can use English appropriately to convey their ideas and understand other people via ELF. This idea seems to match Graddol's description of "a fluent bilingual speaker." In both cases, the focus is on

efficient communication via ELF—not on merely following the NS's model.

How can students become good L2 users? It is obvious that they need to learn the basic rules of grammar, vocabulary, and other skills needed for communication as their foundation, but native-like pronunciation or expressions do not need to be the target of learning. I would also suggest that students need to focus on what Byram (1997) calls "intercultural communicative competence"; this consists of four factors: "knowledge, skills, attitudes, and critical cultural awareness," as summarized below (my italics):

1. Knowledge of social groups and their products and practices in *one's own and one's interlocutor's country*, and the general processes of societal and individual interaction.
2. Skills of interpreting a document/event from *another culture* and relating it to the equivalents from *one's own*; skills of discovering and acquiring new knowledge of a culture and operating it under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction.
3. Attitudes of curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about *other cultures* and belief about *one's own*.
4. Critical cultural awareness/political education; an ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in *one's own* and *other cultures* and *countries*.

The interesting point is that all of the four factors are directed to both one's own culture and the culture of one's interlocutor. Successful intercultural communication, which is increasingly necessary under globalization, requires students to cultivate knowledge about their counterparts' culture as well as their own. As Cook claims (2005, p. 55), it is important to realize both "external and internal goals" of language education. People tend to focus only on the external goal of TL use, but the other important role of language learning and teaching is "students' mental development as individuals."

Without cultivating one's own mind deeply, no meaningful thought is possible. Even if students have a great command of the TL, it is useless without having original ideas to convey. In order to cultivate students' mind through language education, their L1 seems to play a crucial role. As Macaro (2005) points out,

students will better and quicker access to their cultural schemata via the L1 since "they have been stored and activated in the past" via the L1 (p. 79). In short, one of the possible goals for Japanese students is to become good L2 users, have a strong awareness of "intercultural communicative competence," and cultivate their own minds so that they have meaningful content to express in the TL.

2. Teachers' Role

As for the second key question, regarding what kind of roles Japanese teachers (as NNSs) play in the course of English teaching, it is worth pointing out that—along with the growing demand for English learning and teaching—more and more NNSs are teaching English all over the world. In fact, the majority of English teachers in Japan are still Japanese. Under the trend of an English-only approach and the pursuit of becoming "native-like," some teachers lose their confidence as an English teacher just because they are NNSs. However, once we set the alternative goal fostering good L2 users, these teachers can regain their confidence and motivation. In my opinion, there are at least two strengths of NNS-teachers.

First of all, a NNS-teacher can become a good role model for the students as an L2 learner and user. Many NNS-teachers don't have enough confidence in the area of vocabulary, pronunciation, or cultural knowledge of the TL (Medgyes, 2000, p. 357); however, this can be turned into a strength. Since the NNS-teacher need to study about those aspects of the TL continuously, the students can observe a good role model of life-long L2 learner. This kind of attitude on the part of the teacher can be a great source of motivation for the students, who are likewise L2 learners. Unlike NS-teachers, NNS-teachers can indicate to students an attainable goal as a L2 learner and user.

The other advantage of NNS-teachers is that they have had to face the same problems as the students face. Therefore, they know where the students' problems exist much better than a NS teacher would. For instance, McNeill (2005) reveals that NNS-teachers can identify "sources of lexical difficulty in reading texts" more accurately than NS-teachers can (p.123). According to Lasagabaster and Sierra (2005), 70% of the students valued NNS-Ts as "a source of learning strategies" (p. 234). Benke and Medgyes examine students' evaluation of NNS-teachers and claim that the NNS-teachers are considered to have "a more structured approach to teaching

grammar and are better able to deal with grammatical difficulties" (2005, p. 202).

In sum, there seems to be a great potential for NNS-teachers to contribute to English education as good role models of L2 user/learner while they are utilizing their inherent strengths.

VI. Conclusion

Upon examining the value of L1 use in the language classroom, with regard to methodological, cognitive, pedagogical, and sociolinguistic aspects, my conclusion is that there is, indeed, great potential for using L1 to facilitate students' language learning. Further research on this topic is of course necessary, however, in order to determine the most effective methods and amounts of L1 usage. For researchers and teachers, I think one important task is to arrive at an optimal balance between L1 and TL, and to to promote students' language learning.

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