

Juergen J. Bulach : Multilingual Instruction in the German Language Classroom

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Abstract

This paper focuses on multilingual instruction in the German language classroom. I describe a study that engaged 58 Japanese university students who learned German through German, English, and Japanese in the same class(es). The purpose of this study was to analyze students' reactions to multilingual instruction. I provide a context of the study, describe the course content and then report on my observations and comments and the results derived from a questionnaire administered to students. My observations and the questionnaire findings appear to confirm the view that students prefer multilingual instruction in the German language classroom but that there is a considerable amount of variation in the language preference dependent on the specific language skill that is taught.

Background

Multilingualism is not a recent phenomenon. The number of multilingual people in the world has always outnumbered the number of monolinguals. People generally understand what the term multilingualism means, mainly that it refers to “the ability of societies, institutions, groups and individuals to engage, on a regular basis, with more than one language in their day-to-day lives” (European Commission, 2007). On the individual level, a multilingual is someone who has the ability to use three or more languages in differing degrees of code mixing (Aronin & Hufeisen, 2009).

As an academic discipline of language acquisition, multilingualism, also commonly referred to as plurilingualism or third-language acquisition (TLA), is relatively new, because it had been regarded as an extension of bilingualism (Cenoz & Genessee, 1998). Language acquisition studies tended to

focus on the first language or on the acquisition of the second language, but there had been relatively little research conducted on language acquisition beyond the L2. (De Angelis, 2007). It was as if cross-linguistic influences from the L1 and L2 were disregarded in the acquisition of the L3.

Although there is still much to learn about multilingualism, the research into this discipline is starting to bear fruit. Language researchers are gradually beginning to recognize that non-native language acquisition cannot be solely based on L2 learner behavior (De Angelis, 2007).

One specific area in the field of multilingualism, which is potentially significant for foreign language learners, is the influence of one non-native language on another. The less the language learner knows about the target language, it is reasonable to expect that the more the learner will draw from another source or language (Ringbom, 1987). This is particularly the case when the learners native language is unrelated to the L3 they are learning which leads them to transfer knowledge from the more closely related L2 (Hufesien, 1991; Cenoz, 2001.)

The Context of the Study

I am a bilingual, dual-national of Germany and the United States and have been instructing Japanese students in English and German for twenty years. I presently teach at a small, women's university in Tokyo at which I instruct students in German and English. I am conversant in Japanese but refrain from using it in the instruction of my English-language classes.

My approach to English instruction is to use the target language as much as possible, even when explaining concepts to students that may be new or challenging. If my students understand half of my initial instructions, then I believe this is a sufficient base on which they can improve their English. Based on my teaching experience, the complete use of the target language in my English classes has not hindered, but enhanced my instruction. Students typically ask me questions in English during class or talk to me in English after class.

Japanese university students have studied English for six years as a compulsory subject in their secondary education studies at either private or public educational institutions, so they come to university with more than a fundamental knowledge of English. In addition, some of them have studied English at private language schools or taken part in short-term and long-term English language programs abroad. Therefore, the English proficiency levels of students in one class may vary.

In Japan, foreign language study commonly refers to the study of English. There has been much discussion by educators and government leaders about the poor state of English language learning

in Japan, but it cannot be denied that the English language already plays a major role in this country. Foreign language study in Japan is greatly dominated by the study of English and communicative competence in it is highly regarded by schools and companies.

In 2009, the Japan Ministry of Education announced the establishment of the Global 30 Project in which thirteen top universities across Japan were selected to offer degree programs to be conducted in English. More and more universities in Japan have taken note and now offer some content courses in English (Asakura, 2014)

In the private sector, many Japanese companies use the Test of International Communication (TOEIC) as an assessment tool to evaluate the English language competence of applicants and employees. Achieving an adequate score on the TOEIC can mean the difference between obtaining a position with a company or advancing in it.

There are five non-English foreign language courses offered at my university: German, French, Korean, Chinese and Japanese as a Second Language. The university makes no preference as to the nationality of the instructors when offering them positions of employment. Some of the instructors of these courses are Japanese, while others are native-speakers of the languages they instruct. Also, there is no uniform language policy that they should use in their classes. The instructor determines how much time is spent teaching in the target language.

The Participants

The participants in this study were fifty-eight students representing several majors in the Faculty of Literature from freshmen to seniors at a women's university in Tokyo. They ranged from high-beginner to high-advanced in English ability and none had been previously enrolled in a German-language course. Apart from three foreign exchange students, two from China and one from South Korea, the students were native-speakers of Japanese. The study took place across two consecutive semesters in two separate introductory German courses that met once a week for 90 minutes.

The Content of the German Course

The textbook I assigned for the German course was *Schritte 1* published by Hueber Verlag. This textbook is commonly used in German as a Second Language classrooms in German-speaking countries and in German-language classes throughout the world. The content aligns with the A1 language proficiency level found in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. The aim of the textbook is to provide students with the linguistic tools, which they will need to function in daily life in German-

speaking countries.

The textbook introduces the user to words, phrases, dialogue patterns, and highlights informal and formal language usage and notes differences in dialects. It emphasizes listening, speaking and vocabulary learning but also contains short readings combined with listening exercises. There are a total of seven units that cover such varied topics as greetings, family, shopping, the home, daily life, free time, children and school. Every unit includes a short page on grammar points without explanations. There are no grammar exercises in the regular textbook, but the grammar points are found in the dialogues, listening exercises and readings. There is an extensive workbook attached to the back of the textbook and each section of the workbook corresponds to the respective unit in the regular textbook. The workbook provides exercises in which students write their answers related to the grammar points brought up in the regular classroom text as well as using the vocabulary that was covered in the regular textbook.

An interesting aspect about *Schritte 1* is its promotion of the use of other languages in its exercises. For example, one exercise in the teacher's edition gives a list of countries in German and asks students to write the names in English, in other languages and then in their own language (p. 74). In another exercise, students are asked to do the same for food items (p. 87). Many of the words in these exercises are very similar to their English equivalents and several are close in pronunciation to the Japanese words.

The instructors' edition makes it clear that bringing other languages into the classroom can actually aid in the acquisition of German. Also, the textbook authors recognize that most students have already studied English, and assume that a certain amount of German can be comprehensible to students because of the linguistic similarities shared by the two languages. It was this multilingual aspect of the textbook that set the stage for the use of English and Japanese in this study.

The Instructor's Observations and Comments

I only used German in my first two lessons. There were two reasons for my initial monolingual approach. First, I wanted to make it clear in the minds of my students that the focus would be on German, so they should expect the majority of the course to be in that language. Some of the students knew me as an English instructor, and were understandably accustomed to communicating with me in English. The second reason for the initial all-German approach was because I wanted to see how far I could stretch their communicative competence without having to switch to another language. In other words, would it be unnecessary to bring other languages into the classroom.

There were some obvious differences in my German and English language instruction. Because this was my students' first experience to learn German, I found it necessary to repeat and clarify words and phrases through examples more than I normally do in my instruction of English.

I observed that dictionary usage was more essential than in my English classes, too. It was very common to see students look up words in their dictionaries as we went through the learning activities. I did not specify what type of dictionaries students should use but most chose Japanese/German dictionaries, while several students selected English/German ones.

I instructed students in how to use basic questions that one would ask in a German language class. The following list contains some of the more frequently used questions:

- Wie sagt man das auf Deutsch? (How do you say that in German?)
- Ist das richtig? (Is this correct?)
- Könnten Sie mir das bitte erklären? (Could you please explain that to me?)
- Was bedeutet dieses Wort? (What does this word mean?)

Students used these basic questions to a great degree. At first they would point and read them to me but after some practice they were able to say them without referring to their notes.

Homework was another essential part of the course, much more so than in my English classes. There was no way for students to *wing it* if they had not completed their homework before class. A majority of the homework I assigned came from the workbook section at the back of the textbook. A typical workbook assignment required students to write the vocabulary definitions of the words I would cover in the next lesson. I never specified in which language they should write the definitions, but I observed that those who wrote the meanings in Japanese usually were the same students who had chosen to use Japanese/German dictionaries, while those who wrote the meanings in English were the English/German dictionary users.

As the lessons gradually increased in difficulty, it became necessary to use English and, to a lesser extent, Japanese. The language switch came from the students when they posed questions to me as I circulated among them while they worked alone or in pairs. They appeared more willing to talk to me one to one or in pairs than when I stood in front of the class. I found that students preferred to ask me for assistance or advice in these smaller class arrangements. If they used English, I would respond to them

in German. If they were unable to understand me, and this was often, I followed the German explanation with the language they had used first, English or Japanese. The amount of English usage exceeded that of Japanese. Regardless of what language they spoke, I always got a nice “Danke schön” but never a “Thank you.”

After the first two or three lessons, many students were confident enough to start communicating with me in German, but they often substituted English words when they were at a loss with German. They typically prepared these exchanges in advance but without any urging on my part. The classrooms became a real mix of languages, but I found the atmosphere to be a relaxed one and the students appeared willing to communicate freely with me and their fellow students. The initial anxiety that I had encountered among my students on the first day of class had disappeared.

Table 1: Results of Students’ Questionnaire Answers

Questions + Answers	Number of Students
1. How closely related is English to German to you?	
a. Very closely related	32
b. Closely related	13
c. Somewhat closely related	9
d. Not closely related at all	4
e. I do not know	0
2. How closely related is Japanese to German to you?	
a. Very closely related	0
b. Closely related	0
c. Somewhat closely related	5
d. Not closely related at all	47
e. I do not know	6
3. What type of language dictionary do you prefer to use in your German language class?	
a. German/Japanese language dictionary	17
b. German/English language dictionary	14
c. Both a German/Japanese dictionary and a German/English dictionary	27

Questions + Answers	Number of Students
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4. In which language(s), English, German or Japanese, would you prefer your teacher to explain German grammar in your class?	
a. English only	4
b. German only	1
c. Japanese only	16
d. A mix of English/German	8
e. A mix of English/Japanese	7
f. A mix of German/Japanese	11
g. A mix of English, German and Japanese	9
h. No preference	2
5. In which language(s), English, German or Japanese, would you prefer your teacher to explain German pronunciation in your class?	
a. English only	2
b. German only	5
c. Japanese only	2
d. A mix of English/German	26
e. A mix of English/Japanese	0
f. A mix of German/Japanese	7
g. A mix of English, German and Japanese	16
h. No preference	0
6. In which language(s), English, German or Japanese, would you prefer your teacher to explain German reading skills in your class?	
a. English only	7
b. German only	5
c. Japanese only	9
d. A mix of English/German	9
e. A mix of English/Japanese	7
f. A mix of German/Japanese	8
g. A mix of English, German and Japanese	12
h. No preference	1

Questions + Answers	Number of Students
7. In which language(s), English, German or Japanese, would you prefer your teacher to explain German speaking skills in your class?	
a. English only	6
b. German only	9
c. Japanese only	4
d. A mix of English/German	12
e. A mix of English/Japanese	5
f. A mix of German/Japanese	8
g. A mix of English, German and Japanese	14
h. No preference	0
8. In which language(s), English, German or Japanese, would you prefer your teacher to explain German vocabulary in your class?	
a. English only	6
b. German only	2
c. Japanese only	8
d. A mix of English/German	11
e. A mix of English/Japanese	9
f. A mix of German/Japanese	10
g. A mix of English, German and Japanese	12
h. No preference	0
9. In which language(s), English, German or Japanese, would you prefer your teacher to explain German writing skills in your class?	
a. English only	4
b. German only	3
c. Japanese only	9
d. A mix of English/German	7
e. A mix of English/Japanese	7
f. A mix of German/Japanese	15
g. A mix of English, German and Japanese	13
h. No preference	0

Discussion

The data derived from the questionnaire in Table 1 reveal that students had varying reactions to my multilingual instruction of German and their answers indicate that their language preference depended greatly on the type of instruction I provided them, i.e.- speaking, grammar, listening, etc.

I was not particularly surprised by the students' answers to the questions about the relationship of English and Japanese to German (Table 1: questions #1 and #2). I was somewhat reluctant to include these questions in the questionnaire because it is obvious that English and German, as both European languages, share many more linguistic similarities than Japanese and German. That said, I decided to include these two questions after some students told me that they found English and German less similar than before enrolling in the course.

Their answers to the question on dictionary usage (Table 1: question #3) were also expected due to what I had observed in class. I was impressed with the group of students who consistently used their English dictionaries. These were students who formed the core of the advanced English speakers. Perhaps the answers to this particular question would be different if I had required students to use, at least on a partial basis, an English/German dictionary.

As for the instruction of German grammar (Table 1: question #4), it was notable that not that the majority of students answered that they preferred to receive their instruction in Japanese but in the number of students who chose various language combinations (English only, English/German, English/Japanese, German/Japanese). When one takes the total number of "English only" and the three language combinations into account, then it is clear that the majority of students are comfortable with learning grammar in other languages. That does not hold true for a "German only" grammar instruction scenario, however.

German as a language of instruction or some language combination that includes it was clearly the choice of most students (Table 1: question #5). Students evidently have the opinion that they would like to learn German pronunciation in German and not instructed in another language.

The students' answers to questions in regard to the instruction of speaking skills, vocabulary and writing skills (Table 1: questions #7- #9) reveal no overriding language preference. In fact, their answers indicate a great variation of languages preferences. A closer look at their choices shows a specific pattern behind their choices, however. There is a clear non-preference for "German only" instruction but when German is used with either English and/or Japanese, then the desire for German increases significantly, which can be interpreted to mean that the students are more secure in learning German in combination with other languages.

Conclusion

Multilingual instruction provides students with an opportunity to use all their linguistic knowledge in learning a foreign language. It may present educators and schools with specific challenges, but the potential benefits outweigh the difficulties, even in monolingual countries like Japan. This study revealed that the students reacted positively to learning German through the languages of German, English and Japanese but that their language preference is strongly influenced by the language skill (speaking, listening, reading, writing, pronunciation) they are learning.

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Appendix

The purpose of this questionnaire is to collect research information about your German-language studies. Your answers will be used for research purposes only. Select only one answer to each question.

1. How closely related is English to German to you?
 - a. Very closely related
 - b. Closely related
 - c. Somewhat closely related
 - d. Not closely related at all
 - e. I do not know

2. How closely related is Japanese to German to you?
 - a. Very closely related
 - b. Closely related
 - c. Somewhat closely related
 - d. Not closely related at all
 - e. I do not know

3. What type of language dictionary do you prefer to use in your German language class?
 - a. German/Japanese language dictionary
 - b. German/English language dictionary
 - c. Both a German/Japanese dictionary and a German/English dictionary

4. In which language(s), English, German or Japanese, would you prefer your teacher to explain German grammar in your class?
- a. English only
 - b. German only
 - c. Japanese only
 - d. A mix of English/German
 - e. A mix of English/Japanese
 - f. A mix of German/Japanese
 - g. A mix of English, German and Japanese
 - h. No preference
5. In which language(s), English, German or Japanese, would you prefer your teacher to explain German pronunciation in your class?
- a. English only
 - b. German only
 - c. Japanese only
 - d. A mix of English/German
 - e. A mix of English/Japanese
 - f. A mix of German/Japanese
 - g. A mix of English, German and Japanese
 - h. No preference
6. In which language(s), English, German or Japanese, would you prefer your teacher to explain German reading skills in your class?
- a. English only
 - b. German only
 - c. Japanese only
 - d. A mix of English/German
 - e. A mix of English/Japanese
 - f. A mix of German/Japanese
 - g. A mix of English, German and Japanese
 - h. No preference

7. In which language(s), English, German or Japanese, would you prefer your teacher to explain German speaking skills in your class?
- a. English only
 - b. German only
 - c. Japanese only
 - d. A mix of English/German
 - e. A mix of English/Japanese
 - f. A mix of German/Japanese
 - g. A mix of English, German and Japanese
 - h. No preference
8. In which language(s), English, German or Japanese, would you prefer your teacher to explain German vocabulary in your class?
- a. English only
 - b. German only
 - c. Japanese only
 - d. A mix of English/German
 - e. A mix of English/Japanese
 - f. A mix of German/Japanese
 - g. A mix of English, German and Japanese
 - h. No preference
9. In which language(s), English, German or Japanese, would you prefer your teacher to explain German writing skills in your class?
- a. English only
 - b. German only
 - c. Japanese only
 - d. A mix of English/German
 - e. A mix of English/Japanese
 - f. A mix of German/Japanese
 - g. A mix of English, German and Japanese
 - h. No preference