

Why Do Students Use Japanese?

Hiroaki Umehara

ABSTRACT

Although many teachers think student usage of an L1 reduces language learning opportunities (Swain and Lapkin, 2000), there is a growing body of study that recommends the use of Japanese (L1) in English classes (Birch, 2010). Therefore, it seems important to consider why students are using Japanese before claiming all Japanese is a hindrance to language learning. This reflective paper attempts to discover what kind of student interactions unfold when the use of their L1 is explicitly prohibited by the teacher. The observation of one English discussion class suggests that the students employ Japanese for intersubjectivity and to avoid losing face, not due to their laziness. Consistent with previous findings on the benefits of L1 use, this paper describes the potential usefulness of judicious use of L1 and the importance of analyzing whether students are *using* or *abusing* Japanese in their English classes.

INTRODUCTION

L1 use in L2 classrooms has been a contentious issue in the field of second language acquisition (Leeming, 2011, Saito, 2014). The direct method (Cummins, 2007) or monolingual principle states that English is best taught in English, and this ideology has exerted much influence on language education policies in Japan (see Fredrick, 2011; Honna & Takeshita, 2005). According to Stephens (2006), recent English programs in Japan are apt to view a monolingual instruction policy more favorably, and Tokyo's recent appointment as the host city for the 2020 Olympics has fueled the debates on the pedagogical principle "*eigo wa eigode*"—"English classes should be taught in English" (Kubota, 2014). When discussing an English-only policy, the focal point is the role of the students' L1, and the issue is usually discussed from two different SLA perspectives: cognitive approaches and sociocultural approaches (Foster and Ohta, 2005). The advocates of an English-only policy tend to support cognitive approaches, especially interactionist theory for second language acquisition, which states that since significant exposure to comprehensible input is the key element for language learning, maximizing L2 while minimizing L1 in classrooms should be encouraged (Ohta, 1995). This view is taken as a given and is well-ingrained in recent task-based language teaching; a lot of pro-communicative teaching practitioners tend to view L1 use in the classroom as a hindrance (Cummins, 2007).

Another group of SLA researchers, who acknowledge the importance of students' L1 tend to support sociocultural approaches. In these approaches, language development occurs as a social process. L2 learners develop language knowledge by interacting with other learners. Sociocultural theory carefully examines the creation of the context and learner interactions in order to analyze how learners socially construct the mutual understandings through which language is acquired (Ohta, 1995). Teaching professionals following this framework tend to see L1 as a critical tool for language learners, one that enables them to interact meaningfully. The present study is situated within this framework in order to describe the setting and student interactions.

There is a growing body of study that recommends the use of Japanese in English classes (e.g. Birch, 2010), claiming that an L1 is useful in saving time, lowering anxiety, explaining difficult concepts, and managing the classroom (Lee, 2013). These studies usually observe how and when Japanese students use their first language while engaging in English language tasks. In other words, students are allowed to reference their L1 when necessary. There is no study that examines student interactions in a classroom that explicitly prohibits the use of Japanese. Thus, this present paper attempts to discover what kind of student interactions unfold when the use of their L1 is explicitly prohibited by the teacher.

Context

The class that was the setting for this paper was an English discussion class at a private university in Tokyo. This discussion class was one of the compulsory English courses that all first year students have to take for the duration of one year. The class has one 90-minute lesson every week, and all the classes are conducted following a unified syllabus, which aims to develop the students' language fluency. In this class, fluency development is referred to as the "development of students' abilities to use English to communicate meaningfully in real time" (Hurling, 2012). With the emphasis on language fluency, the class size is kept small; each class has only seven to nine students. In conducting the class, explicit feedback on language form is only acceptable when it is employed to repair communication breakdowns. Teachers are encouraged to maximize students' English talking time so that they can get as many chances to use English as possible. All students are told on the first day of the class that the class is conducted only in English and that the excessive use of Japanese will be penalized. This English-only policy is explicitly stated in the student handbook as well. All first year university students are separated into four levels, and the focal level of this study is level 4 (low-intermediate level). The class was comprised of eight students: six male students and two female students.

DISCUSSION

Observations took place over 13 weeks, beginning during the second week of the class in the second semester. This study was triggered by one fascinating interaction I heard from the students before the very first class began.

<Right before the class started>

Shun: I just met my former English Discussion teacher.

Yoshi: Haha...

Shun: But I just said "yeah" many times to him because I don't understand English.

Yoshi: Yeah, I do that too all the time.

Shun: He was speaking gibberish. I guess he was speaking Thai.

Yoshi: No, no, Chinese. (*laughter*)

After I overheard this conversation, one scary thought crossed my mind: these students might participate in this discussion evasively if I force them to follow the English-only policy. I usually go over the class objectives and rules emphasizing the importance of using only English in the class on the first day of the class. However, this time I did not stress the English-only policy so much. Rather, I stressed the importance of using and practicing English to share interesting ideas. I did not state that excessive Japanese could hurt their grades.

Initially only field notes and a reflective teaching journal were kept; however, after a few particular features were noticed, the classes were audio-recorded. During the first two weeks of the semester, I took notes on the students' language proficiency, personalities, and their group dynamics to gain a big picture of the class. I adapted Spradley's (1980) model to organize my initial notes. In making observations, I learned that all the students were very active and motivated individuals who were studying community and human services. Almost all of them actively participated in sports club activities, and since they had intense practice sessions almost every day, they were very tired at the end of day. Although all the students had affable and fun-loving personalities, I did not enjoy the fact that I occasionally had to remind them of the English-only policy. I taught the students some practical English phrases to solve communication breakdowns, such as "How do you say...in English?" and "Can you say that

again?” but some students still used Japanese. Needless to say, I could have come down hard on them, penalizing their Japanese usage, but this type of practice does not agree with my teaching belief that values positive affect and rapport. I also think that students need to enjoy a class to learn anything. Moreover, I was afraid that if pushed too hard on the English-only aspect these students would engage in the class with a “just saying yes” attitude. Furthermore, it has been suggested that L1 plays an important role in L2 learning (see Anton & DiCamilla, 1998) and that students sometimes need their L1 to fully participate in L2 classes (Cook, 2001). Thus, to better understand when and why students were using Japanese during their interactions, the classes were recorded from weeks 6 to 14.

While keeping field notes and the teaching journal and carefully analyzing transcripts of the audio recordings, I noticed some recurring patterns that prompted student exchanges of Japanese utterances.

Intersubjectivity

The first pattern arose when Japanese was used for intersubjectivity. In this situation, Japanese is employed to understand, control, and complete a task. According to De Guerrero and Villami (1994), “intersubjectivity” is achieved when “individual[s] working in collaboration define the objects, events, and goals of a task in the same way.” First, the two students, who had the lowest English proficiency, would inquire about the meaning of questions either in Japanese or English. Second, the other students would try to answer their peers’ questions in English, but these attempts usually did not succeed, making things even more complicated for those two students. It should be noted that all the other students always attempted to answer the two students’ inquiries in English, thereby following the English-only policy. After a few negotiations had been tried, both parties would inevitably get frustrated and would eventually fall back on Japanese. To illustrate this interaction, a segment from a feedback session on a fluency activity in Lesson 10 has been provided.

- Teacher: Guys, how did you do from two minutes and thirty to one minutes thirty? Did you get all of the information 100%? Talk in pair. How about you?
- Yoshi: Ah ee 100%?
- Teacher: Yes, you had less time from two thirty to one thirty, did you still talk about all the same idea? 100%?
- Yoshi: Idea 100%?
- Teacher: Yes 100%
- Yoshi: Ah yeah, yes, yes...
- Teacher: Okay great. Okay do you guys understand? So please talk in pairs. Three, two, one start.
- Yoshi: **Ee doiukoto?** (*What do you mean?*) [*whispering*]
- Hiroto: So say 100% short time?
- Yoshi: 100%?
- Yes, no, yes? **Doiukoto?** (*What do you mean?*)
- Hiroto: **Zenbu ietakatte. Nifun hann kara ietakatte.** (*Did you say all the idea? from two thirty to one thirty.*)
- Yoshi: **Aaa haha zenzen wakaranakatta. No dane.** (*Oh I see, I did not know what to do. Then the answer is no.*)

In this excerpt, the teacher tried to demonstrate what the students had to do in the next activity and called upon Yoshi. The student asked for clarification by partially repeating “100%?”

with rising intonation. The teacher provided further explanation, and the student asked, “Idea 100%?” again for even more elucidation; he said, “Ah yeah, yes, yes,” as his answer to the question. The following interactions between Yoshi and Hiroto clearly illustrate that Yoshi did not understand the question and had provided a throwaway answer to avoid any further negotiation for meaning. Yoshi finally understood the question with the Japanese explanation from Hiroto.

Avoid losing face

The second pattern occurs when Japanese is employed to avoid losing face. When the students engaged in discussions, the two weaker students unintentionally got laughs from their peers. They were obviously class-clown types but did seem not to appreciate being laughed at for their English. I noticed that these two students like to get the whole room laughing when they mean to be funny, but when they are seriously trying to communicate their ideas, it is a different story. When their peers laughed at their genuine efforts in English, these students tended to share the same ideas in Japanese, so that they could correctly convey their ideas and avoid humiliating themselves. The following is an excerpt from a lesson about public manners.

- Shun: Eating bento in train is bad.
 Yasu: Why?
 Shun: Ah not good because not good.
 Yasu: Haha why?
 Shun: Because it **no nose, no nose**.
 Yasu: “No nose?”
 Shun: Yes, “No nose.” (with gesture)
 Yasu: Hahaha, I don’t understand.
 Shun: Japanese say “**kusai**” (*smells bad*)
 Yasu: Oh okay, hhhh.

These two types of Japanese usage seemed to be serious issues that I had to address because in these cases, the use of Japanese had nothing to do with the laziness that many teachers worry about permitting to detrimental effect in the classroom (Ford, 2009). Teachers tend to be overly concerned about the risks associated with students overusing Japanese to the expense of their actually practicing English (Lee, 2013), but it seemed to me that the students were using Japanese to actively participate in the classroom activities. I could also argue that the students had used Japanese out of their drive to participate considering that they could have just as easily given up talking and kept quiet.

A supplementary handout

In order to minimize their Japanese usage while enabling them to participate in the class, a supplementary handout was distributed to the students during lessons 7–13; it highlighted all the target phrases and the important vocabulary words needed in order to understand the questions and activities for each week. The students were told to look up any phrases and terms that they did not know as homework so that they could participate in discussions without asking any basic comprehension questions or sharing their ideas in Japanese. Each time, I listed about ten words that seemed above the students’ English levels. All the students took this homework seriously, and they mentioned that the handouts were useful for the class. From my perspective, it seemed like the two weakest students used much less Japanese after the handout was introduced. I told them to add any words that they did not know during the lesson to the list because they could

always refer to the handout without bothering other students.

Scaffolding

I also allowed these two students in particular to get help from other students in Japanese when they were engaging in preparation activities. Because the main goal of this discussion class is to let students “hold fluent, interactive discussions in groups of four for 16 minutes or more” (Hurling, 2012), I tried to encourage the students to equip themselves with the necessary vocabulary before the main discussions. I prompted the students to ask, “How do you say... in English?” questions if they needed, so that they would feel confident enough to try to express their ideas in English during the primary discussions. This encouragement seemed to work very effectively. I noticed many times that the students frequently used the words that they had learned from the preparation activities in the course of the main discussions. Another effort I made to minimize Japanese usage was to always ask, “Do you understand, (insert name)?” to everyone before any discussions began. I made this a routine practice for the students so that they knew that I was really checking their comprehension. If any of them said or seemed to be leaning toward “no”, I attempted to provide more simplified instructions. (It should be noted that I did not use any Japanese for any purposes in the class). If the students still did not understand me, I let one student explain the task in Japanese to the rest of the class. I always reminded them that it is okay to say “I don’t understand” to a teacher. This practice also appeared to be effective considering that I was getting more and more “I don’t understand” answers as the semester progressed.

Students’ Perspectives

After the last class ended, I interviewed my two weakest students in Japanese, and they told me how hard it was to follow the English-only policy. They said that one of the other compulsory English classes had been disastrous for them because they had had no idea what they were supposed to be doing, and if they had asked their friends questions in Japanese about the teacher’s instructions, the teacher would get furious because they had spoken Japanese. They said that they did not and could not care about the class that much since they did not know what they were doing. They had just attended the course so that they could fulfill the requirement. I feel this is a very sad thing because I believe that teachers should enforce the English-only policy out of their concern for student achievement, but in this case, the students could not understand the instructor’s original intentions.

CONCLUSION

Many teachers think student usage of an L1 reduces language learning opportunities (Swain and Lapkin, 2000) but incorporating an L1 is sometimes unavoidable when learning and practicing the target language (Chavez, 2003; Umehara & Gorsuch, 2013). As many studies have suggested, an L1 should be flexibly employed and tailored to student needs while emphasizing the L2 usage in the classroom (Carson, and Kashihara, 2012). Some teachers might think my practice of encouraging “How do you say...in English?” prevents student opportunities to negotiate for meaning. I acknowledge that it is important to push students to interact and decode meanings in English and that such practice will teach students communication strategies they can draw upon in the real world. However, I also think it is important to bear in mind that negotiation for meaning can be very frustrating and embarrassing for non-native English speakers (Aston, 1986). Foster (1998) found that intermediate EFL students did not initiate much negotiation for meaning when they encountered communication breakdowns. She claims that repair practices are frustrating for students since they slow down the flow of a given task and are also indicators

of a student's incompetence. Lee (2013) discovered that low proficiency Japanese students had serious problems understanding and negotiating meaning in English, and they tended to eventually make use of some Japanese.

Carson and Kashihara's (2012) study shows that student desires for instructors to use and know their L1 declined with increasing L2 ability. Based on their findings, they also suggest that instructors who are proficient in Japanese should teach lower-level students and that instructors who are proficient in English should teach higher-level students. It would be impossible to match an instructor's L1 proficiency with students' L2 proficiency levels, but instructors and program developers should at least carefully examine why students are falling back on their L1 before penalizing all cases of its utilization. Needless to say, instructors should take their teaching development seriously so that they can effectively provide clarifying instructions before relying on any L1 use. It is hoped that this paper will raise awareness about the importance of analyzing whether students are *using* or *abusing* Japanese in their English classes.

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