

The Use of ' Only English ' in a Learner-Centered University Classroom in Japan

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The Use of ‘Only English’ in a Learner-Centered University Classroom in Japan

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Abstract

This review of research examines Japanese students’ beliefs about when and how much a native English conversation instructor should use the students’ mother tongue (MT) in class. The students’ MT being used in class must be taken into strong consideration since the exclusive use of the target language [English] in the classroom is not a recent practice when introduced alongside communicative methodology. Total language immersion has been the “bedrock” of classroom teaching for over a hundred years (Howatt 1984, Burden 139).

However, recently it has been argued by language instructors and pedagogical researchers that denying students the use of their MT is on prescriptive grounds and is without due consideration to for their educational process. Thus, the principal aim of this paper is to invite practicing teachers to address their own styles and methods of teaching while seeking students’ opinions in their own situation (p147).

Summary

Peter Burden, an English Conversation instructor at Okayama Shoka University in Japan, has dedicated his time to convincing other instructors to break free of the traditional communicative methodology of exclusive use of English as the target language (TL) and concentrate more on the students’ needs. He came to this conclusion after reading the results of a survey carried out by the Japanese Education Ministry in 1997, where only 24% of the students were satisfied with class content and only 19% were satisfied with the instructors’ methods of instruction concerning university level English as a foreign language (p140). He feels that language learning pedagogy has made many claims about the use of the students’ native language in monolingual classrooms, but fails to “receive insight into the students’ difficulties and that instructors continue in practices which many run contrary to students’ self-esteem, performance, future goals and motivation, and new materials are not necessarily relevant to students’ own perceived learning needs” (p140). Burden uses this research as an attempt to illustrate how the students in a typical university class in Japan see the use of their native language. He also invites practicing teachers to seek students’ opinions when addressing their own styles and methods of teaching.

Burden considered using a Likert five point scale, but recalled Reid’s (p1987) research stating

that, “while most students use the entire range in a consistent manner, Japanese students tend to respond towards the mean” (p141). Thus he decided to administrate a questionnaire in Japanese with a simple ‘yes’ and ‘no’ closed format. While he felt this was limiting, five instructors (including the author) administered the questionnaire with a number of subjects from four different universities and categorized them into four groups based on their English skill: Pre-Intermediate, Intermediate, Advanced, and in a separate group Postgraduate. While explaining to the students how to fill out the questionnaire Burden felt it was important for the instructors to not express their opinions nor state the purpose of the research.

The most important questions were, “Should the teacher know the students’ native language?” “Should the [non-Japanese] teacher use the students’ native language in class?” and “Should the students use their native language in class?” Across all groups a very large majority of the students felt that the instructor should have knowledge of their native language, with the Advanced class having the lowest percentage of 72% within their group. Among the 290 subjects, 211 felt that the instructor should use their native language in class. However, the percentage of students agreeing to the first two questions of the Postgraduate classes were the highest (yet the lowest number of students out of the four groups). Burden felt that since he did not have sufficient knowledge of their educational background prior to his arrival to the University because of the variety of their ages and that their English proficiency cannot be easily generalized, there may be some factors that negatively affect the results of their group.

As for whether or not the students should be allowed to speak their native language in class, three-fourths of all students in all groups felt that it is necessary to converse in their native language but only when they did not understand certain grammar points or vocabulary and needed to rely on a fellow classmate for help. In addition, Burden noted that he was uncertain if decreasing the number of students in each group would reflect the reality of the conditions within the universities in that few students have the motivation to continue language studies beyond the compulsory first year (p142).

Statement of the Research Problem

Language learning pedagogy makes many claims about the use of the students’ MT in monolingual classrooms, but only rarely makes any reference to what the students in our classrooms themselves believe or feel they need (p139). This debate over the use of the MT in the classroom has been “one of the greatest dilemmas in the foreign language class” (Medgyes 1994, Burden 139). Reason being, from the height of British colonialism, educators used extreme measures, including corporal punishment, towards any student who used their MT in the classroom. Other colonial governments oppressed the use of any MTs with the threat of fines or imprisonment. Another reason as to why this has been an on going debate is that it is believed that if “the student starts speaking in their own

language without your permission... it generally mean something is wrong with the lesson” (Willis 1981: XIV, Burden 139). Nonetheless, Burden feels that the use of ‘English only’ in the classroom can have serious effects on the students’ self-esteem, performance, future goals and motivation if they simply do not understand the TL (p140). Thus, by examining the student’ beliefs about the English conversation instructor using and/or allowing the use of their MT, the instructor will be able to incorporate their own teaching methods while understanding the students’ opinions. It is important to stress the understanding of the students’ opinions. With this in mind, “the teacher and students can establish their own rules for the classroom” (p147).

Research Methodology

This is a ‘Quantitative / Nonexperimental’ research method, and has a mix of descriptive research and correlation research. After the students answered the questionnaires the data was broken down into five categories, the four student categories plus one including all of the students. The ‘yes’ and ‘no’ responses were changed to a percentage and whole numbers were used.

Should the Teacher or the Student use the Mother Tongue in Class?

Table 1

	All Students n=290		Pre-Intermediate n=150		Intermediate n=64		Advanced n=39		Postgraduate n=37	
	yes	no	yes	no	yes	no	yes	no	yes	no
1. Should the teacher know the students’ MT?	87	13	89	11	88	13	72	28	95	5
2. Should the teacher use the students’ MT in class?	sometimes	never	sometimes	never	sometimes	never	sometimes	never	sometimes	never
	73	27	83	17	63	38	41	59	84	16
3. Should the students use their MT in class?	sometimes	never	sometimes	never	sometimes	never	sometimes	never	sometimes	never
	73	27	75	25	72	28	69	31	73	27

Major Assertions

Looking at Table 1 (p141), Burden states that “across all four groups it was emphatically felt that the teacher should know the learners’ mother tongue” (p142). The only difference was the use of the students’ MT in class as the class difficulty increases. Note the sharp drop concerning whether the teacher should use the students MT in class from Pre-Intermediate to Advanced students.

Looking at Table 2 (p141), there seems to be a clear distinction across all the ability levels

Table 2

When should the teacher used the students' MT?		n = 211									
	All Students n = 211		Pre-Intermediate n = 124		Intermediate n = 40		Advanced n = 16		Postgraduate n = 31		
	yes	no	yes	no	yes	no	yes	no	yes	no	
4. Explaining new words	50	50	48	52	55	45	44	56	58	42	
5. Explaining grammar	37	63	42	58	28	73	56	44	19	81	
6. Giving instructions	30	70	34	66	18	83	19	81	35	65	
7. Talking about British culture	25	75	27	73	28	73	25	75	13	87	
8. Talking about tests	50	50	59	41	45	55	25	75	32	68	
9. Explaining class rules	25	75	29	71	15	85	19	81	23	77	
10. Explaining why the students are doing something	24	76	27	73	30	70	13	87	10	90	
11. Explaining the differences between MT and English grammar	53	47	56	44	58	43	38	63	39	61	
12. Testing the students	18	82	19	81	23	78	19	81	6	94	
13. Checking for understanding	43	57	43	57	53	48	38	63	32	68	
14. Relaxing the students	61	39	59	41	60	40	56	43	71	29	
15. Creating human contact	38	62	41	59	23	78	44	56	42	58	

between use and usage: students want the teacher to use the TL exclusively when it is being used in communication, but expect the teacher to have a knowledge of and an ability to use the MT when it is appropriate to explain the usage of English (p147).

Key Interpretations

In accordance with the previous assertions, the percentages perceived ability levels ranges from 89% for Pre-Intermediate to 72% for Advanced students (table 1). While the Advanced students still has a very high percentage, there are indications that the advanced learners becoming more “aware of learning strategies” where the students involve themselves more in the process of language learning, which in turn reduces the burden of responsibility on the teacher (p142). This can be assumed that the teacher’s necessity to be proficient in the MT lessens as the students’ level increases, however, the level of proficiency to conduct any of the classes within the comfort level of the students may be rather high.

Role of Theory in the Research

The author theorizes that the relationship between the language instructor and the students has traditionally been in a state of oppression dating back to the British colonial periods. It may be interpreted that he is theorizing that the release of this traditional state of oppression will create “a more relaxed, humanistic classroom where English language learners can freely express themselves” (p139).

Generalizability

While the author does not directly state so, it can be assumed that the use of “the mother tongue” instead of “the Japanese language” and “the target language” instead of “the English language” might be applicable any language, both MT and TL. For example, a native French speaker studying Swahili would have the same beliefs about their language instructor being able to use French to help identify some of the more difficult parts of Swahili as described in the research paper with the Japanese students studying English.

Connections to Teaching

The main reason why I find this research exceptionally interesting is because of my ability to speak Japanese and my interest in teaching English in Japanese universities. As an ‘Assistant Language Teacher’ (ALT), I have experienced such situations concerning questions 1 and 2 on Table 1 in two Toyota City junior highs. At one, I was able to speak Japanese to the students and at the other I was asked to speak only English. At the school where I was able to speak Japanese to the students, I was given greater control over the classes, sometimes complete control. I felt that this raised my status at the school to where I was no longer viewed by the students as an “assistant,” but a full-fledged teacher. However, at the other school where I was not allowed to speak Japanese, I still felt like I excelled as an ALT due to the fact that I could understand many of the students’ questions and more importantly I could recognize when they were confused.

Conclusion

Burden uses this research as an attempt to illustrate how the students in a typical university class in Japan see the use of their native language. He also invites practicing teachers to seek students’ opinions when addressing their own styles and methods of teaching. He notes that many arguments against the use of the students’ native language are “often on prescriptive grounds without due

consideration to the other stakeholders in the educational process, the students themselves.” (p147). He also encourages instructors to find a more humanistic approach towards the needs and values of the students, their culture, and their language, instead of creating a “little corner of an English speaking country” (p147) within the classroom.

Reference

- Burden, Peter (2000). The Use of 'Only English' in a Learner-Centered University Classroom in Japan. *RELC Journal* Vol. 31 No. 1 June 2000. pg. 139-149