

Student Attitudes Towards the Use of L1 in the Classroom

Oliver Rose

My objective in writing this paper was to gauge student opinion on the issue of the language teacher's use of L1 in the classroom, in order to add an important missing perspective to the ongoing debate on this issue. I will offer a very brief background to the debate regarding the pedagogical advantages and disadvantages of the teacher's use of L1 in the classroom, before going on to introduce the survey questions and results.

The 'English-only' approach in the classroom, promoted by many training courses and teaching policy in many schools, dates back to the Direct Method from the 1920's. It is an approach that has held currency amongst native-speaking teachers through a variety of methodologies over the decades for both pragmatic and theoretical reasons (Atkinson, 1991). It has been promoted so widely that teachers using the students' L1 often experience a kind of guilt, despite their use being with the best of pedagogical intentions (Owen, 2003). In response to this, many educators have more recently reconsidered the rationale for the 'English-only' approach, and found validity in the limited use of L1 as a very natural, useful and empowering tool in the language classroom (Atkinson, 1991; Cook 2001; Deller, S & M Rinvoluceri, 2002).

As learner affect is an important factor in language acquisition (Krashen, 1987), it is useful to consider student attitudes and feelings towards this issue. While self-reflective opinions of learners are not objective proof of the efficacy of their learning, their responses should surely be taken into account as part of a basic process of needs assessment. After all, who is in a better position than the actual students themselves to say whether L1 support in the classroom helps or hinders their learning?

It was expected that the lowest level students would be the most keen to have L1 support available, whilst higher level students would be able to cope with less support as their own L2 proficiency developed. For the purposes of analysis, the classes will be divided into lower and higher level groups in order to assess the difference in response according to level. The level of the lower group of classes ranged from elementary to high false beginner, while the higher group could be considered pre-intermediate to intermediate.

The Survey

The survey was taken by 126 students from 9 different English classes at Keiwa College taught by 3 different teachers. Teachers used English-only and/or L1 support approaches according to their teaching philosophy and the class level taught.

I will present the survey contents, questions and responses along with some analysis and interpretation. As the challenges posed by an English-only policy are obviously greater for students with a lower level of English proficiency, I will provide data for two general groups made up from higher (38 students) and lower-level classes (88 students). The original survey, which includes a Japanese translation, is included as Appendix 1.

Survey Section 1 – Survey Introduction

There is ongoing debate in teaching methodology regarding the advantages and disadvantages of the teacher's use of the learners' native language in the classroom.

This survey is to find out Keiwa students' opinions on this issue from their own experiences of English language-learning classrooms.

If you don't understand a question in this survey or are unsure of your opinion, it is okay to not give an answer.

*Thank you for your participation,
Oliver Rose*

I wanted to inform students of the purpose of the survey while eliciting their opinion without pressuring them either way.

Survey Section 2 – ‘Student Affect’

This series of questions was included to find out how students feel about communicating with their teacher, in either English or Japanese.

SA1) I feel stressed and frustrated when I can't understand what the teacher is saying in English.

- a) Never*
- b) Rarely*
- c) Sometimes*
- d) Often*

Table 1 — Student responses to Question SA 1

	Lower-level classes		Higher-level classes	
	No. of students	% of students	No. of students	% of students
a) Never	26	32	13	35
b) Rarely	43	53	14	28
c) Sometimes	11	13	9	34
d) Often	2	2	1	3

Students stress or frustration is obviously a negative learning experience to be avoided. Japanese language support can obviously play a useful role in diminishing this stress.

SA2) I like to be able to talk to the teacher in Japanese.

- a) Never*
- b) Rarely*
- c) Sometimes*
- d) Often*

Table 2 — Student responses to Question SA 2

	Lower-level classes		Higher-level classes	
	No. of students	% of students	No. of students	% of students
a) Never	6	7	7	19
b) Rarely	20	24	10	27
c) Sometimes	47	58	20	54
d) Often	9	11	0	0

It is important to understand students' expectations about language learning. If language students expect to understand what is said 100% of the time, they are too impatient with the uncertainty and challenge of communicating in a second language which is part of the process of learning. If this were the case, students' desires for L1 support could be seen as overly sheltered. However, according to their responses they appear to be comfortable with even less than what would be considered by many as an effective ratio of 'comprehensible input'.

SEAL2) I usually understand what the teacher is saying in English about _____% of the time.

A) up to 70% of the time

B) from 70 to 85% of the time

C) from 85 to 100% of the time

D) 100% of the time

Table 6 — Student responses to Question SEAL 2

	Lower-level classes		Higher-level classes	
	No. of students	% of students	No. of students	% of students
A) up to 70% of the time	19	23	10	27
B) 70 to 85% of the time	46	56	10	27
C) 85 to 100% of the time	13	16	17	46
D) 100% of the time	4	5	0	0

It is surely demotivating for a learner to understand the teacher less than they believe is an effective proportion of the time. The results show that while the higher level group generally met their expectations in this regard, the lower level group tended to understand less than they believe is effective. The use of the students' L1 is not the only way to improve the proportion of

'comprehensible input', but it can certainly ameliorate this degree of student uncertainty quickly and effectively.

SEAL3) To learn effectively students in class should try to speak in English :

- A) only when asked;*
- B) just for practicing target language;*
- C) as much as they are confident with;*
- D) for almost everything they say*

Table 7 — Student responses to Question SEAL 3

	Lower-level classes		Higher-level classes	
	No. of students	% of students	No. of students	% of students
A) only when asked;	4	5	1	3
B) just for practicing target language;	26	32	9	24
C) as much as they are confident with;	40	48	17	46
D) for almost everything they say	12	15	10	27

As well as processing input, according to Swain (1993), students must also produce output in order to facilitate language acquisition. This question sought to gauge student opinion on their own expectations regarding their L2 output in class. If students believed that a limited use of L2 were sufficient for them to learn, it would be consistent of them to not expect much L2 from the teacher. However, the results seem to show that students are fairly supportive, in theory, of the idea of using the L2 for a variety of functions during class.

SEAL4) In my actual classes I try to speak English:

- A) only when asked;*
- B) just for practicing target language;*
- C) as much as I am confident with;*
- D) for almost everything I say*

Table 8 — Student responses to Question SEAL 4

	Lower-level classes		Higher-level classes	
	No. of students	% of students	No. of students	% of students
A) only when asked;	9	11	4	11
B) just for practicing target language;	47	57	16	43
C) as much as they are confident with;	26	32	14	38
D) for almost everything they say	0	0	3	8

This question was actually included to ‘prod’ students to reflect on their L2 use, to encourage them to make a little more effort to use English as much as possible. Despite their responses to the previous question recognizing the importance of the general use of L2 during class, their responses to this question show that they tend to speak less than they believe is beneficial for their own development. The results are slightly better in the higher levels, which should be expected as these students have acquired a wider range of functional language.

Survey Section 4 – Teachers’ Use of L1 in the Classroom

Students' answers may be influenced by a variety of factors such as previous or current teachers' methods, or received ‘folk wisdom’ about language learning etc.

I posed several variations on the same question to give students a chance to think about their answers from different perspectives.

TU1) How often do you like the teacher to use Japanese in class?

(Circle a, b, c or d)

a) Never

(I like teachers to explain only by gestures, pictures and simple English.)

b) Rarely

(I only like teachers to use Japanese if it is a very important point that we cannot understand even after the teacher has tried to communicate

it in various ways.)

c) Sometimes

(I like teachers to give a short and quick explanation in Japanese when we can't understand something.)

d) Always

(I prefer a teacher to always give a Japanese explanation, so that I am completely sure that I have understood properly.)

Table 9 — Student responses to Question TU 1

	Lower-level classes		Higher-level classes	
	No. of students	% of students	No. of students	% of students
a) Never	26	32	15	40
b) Rarely	27	33	15	39
c) Sometimes	27	33	8	21
d) Always	2	2	0	0

This question was posed First to get the students' holistic opinions, before going on to rephrase the question to ask in more detail. While the higher level students were content with less L1 support than the lower level students, the majority of all groups expressed a preference for some support.. It is interesting to note that often students who responded with 'always' for this question often went on to soften their position in their responses to the subsequent questions, indicating that they would actually like some limited L1 support in certain situations.

TU2) When they speak, how often should teachers in class speak in English:

- A) up to 70% of the time
- B) from 70 to 85% of the time
- C) from 85 to 100% of the time
- D) 100% of the time

Table 10 — Student responses to Question TU 2

	Lower-level classes		Higher-level classes	
	No. of students	% of students	No. of students	% of students
A) up to 70% of the time	10	12	5	13
B) 70 to 85% of the time	29	35	3	8
C) 85 to 100% of the time	33	41	19	50
D) 100% of the time	10	12	11	29

Despite 32% in the lower level group and 40% of students in higher level groups preferring no L1 support in response to the previous question, the strength of support for ‘English-only’ in the classroom was significantly lower when the question was reposed in this way. In fact, many student responses indicated a much lower percentage use of English than most ‘L1-use advocates’ would endorse. While L1 use is a valuable tool, it is still desirable to provide as much exposure to ‘comprehensible input’ as possible (Krashen, 1987).

TU3) Do you like Japanese to be used for the following purposes?

Answer descriptions

(a) Never

(I like teachers to explain only by gestures, pictures and simple English.)

b) Rarely

(I only like teachers to use Japanese if it is a very important point that we cannot understand even after the teacher has tried to communicate it in various ways.)

c) Sometimes

(I like teachers to give a short and quick explanation in Japanese when we can't understand something.)

d) Always

(I prefer a teacher to always give a Japanese explanation, so that I am completely sure that I have understood properly.)

Obviously target language use and examples will be conducted in the L2, but language used for other class functions may be out of the range of

students' comprehension. This question was asked in order to find out how important students perceived L1 support to be for various basic classroom functions.

TU3i) Class overview/marks/homework explanation

- a) *Never*
- b) *Rarely*
- c) *Sometimes*
- d) *Always*

Table 11 — Student responses to Question TU 3 i

	Lower-level classes		Higher-level classes	
	No. of students	% of students	No. of students	% of students
a) Never	14	17	14	36
b) Rarely	24	29	11	29
c) Sometimes	36	44	12	32
d) Always	8	10	1	3

It would clearly be unfair to students if their ability to understand basic information about their course was compromised due to an 'English-only' policy. The data shows a desire by the majority of students, especially at the lowest levels, to have some degree of L1 support in this area.

TU3ii) Game/activity procedures and rules

- a) *Never*
- b) *Rarely*
- c) *Sometimes*
- d) *Always*

Table 12 — Student responses to Question TU 3 ii

	Lower-level classes		Higher-level classes	
	No. of students	% of students	No. of students	% of students
a) Never	33	39	22	59
b) Rarely	30	35	8	22
c) Sometimes	19	22	7	19
d) Always	3	4	0	0

In setting up various language activities, situations often arise in which the explanations about the games use more complex language than the actual target language to be practised. The perceived need for L1 support for this function was not particularly strong, as good teachers can in most cases use modeling techniques to demonstrate procedures. However, for certain more complex or unfamiliar activities it may be beneficial to use some L1 explanation in order to get the mechanics of the activity across clearly in order to get on with practicing the actual target language of the activity.

TU3iii) Vocabulary translation

- a) *Never*
- b) *Rarely*
- c) *Sometimes*
- d) *Always*

Table 13 — Student responses to Question TU 3 iii

	Lower-level classes		Higher-level classes	
	No. of students	% of students	No. of students	% of students
a) Never	21	26	12	32
b) Rarely	30	36	16	44
c) Sometimes	24	29	9	24
d) Always	7	9	0	0

While many English words can be explained by pictures, gestures, and English examples, sometimes the most effective and time-efficient way is to give some kind of L1 explanation, or to confirm a student's ideas expressed in L1. This can be especially useful if the teacher does not want to distract the learner from other prioritised learning objectives.

TU3iv) Grammar explanation/translation

- a) *Never*
- b) *Rarely*
- c) *Sometimes*
- d) *Always*

Table 14 — Student responses to Question TU 3 iv

	Lower-level classes		Higher-level classes	
	No. of students	% of students	No. of students	% of students
a) Never	17	21	11	30
b) Rarely	33	40	15	40
c) Sometimes	24	29	11	30
d) Always	8	10	0	0

While English sentence examples are a powerful tool for promoting learner discovery of grammar points, there are situations in which some deductive explanation is also useful for clarification. However, such explanations in English will usually be beyond the comprehension of lower-level learners, so they should be given in Japanese. The L1 can also be an invaluable resource for contrastive analysis of grammar, in order to make clearer the fundamental differences between the L1 and L2.

Conclusion

The survey results indicate that the majority of students would like the L1 to be used in limited ways to support communication and education in the classroom. As anticipated, the desire for L1 support is generally greater amongst lower-level students whose limited language means that an English-only approach results in a significant and constant cognitive burden. It was, however, a positive sign that students overall tended to prefer only a limited use of L1 by the teacher, with the great majority of class conducted in English.

References

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Appendix 1-Survey

Survey Introduction

There is ongoing debate in teaching methodology regarding the advantages and disadvantages of the teacher's use of the learners' native language in the classroom.

This survey is to find out Keiwa students' opinions on this issue from their own experiences of English language-learning classrooms.

If you don't understand a question in this survey or are unsure of your opinion, it is okay to not give an answer. Thank you for your participation,
Oliver Rose

先生が授業中に使う言語について、議論があります。

このアンケートで、みなさんの意見を聞きたいと思っています。敬和の英語授業に対してだけでなく、高校や中学など、これまでの英語の授業の経験から、意見を述べてください。

質問の意味が解らない時や答えにくい時は空けておいて下さい
参加してくれてありがとう、
オリバローズ

Student Affect

1) I feel stressed and frustrated when I can't understand what the teacher is saying in English.

- a) Never
- b) Rarely
- c) Sometimes
- d) Often

2) I like to be able to talk to the teacher in Japanese.

- a) Never
- b) Rarely
- c) Sometimes
- d) Often

3) I feel nervous trying to ask the teacher about my course in English.

- a) Never
- b) Rarely
- c) Sometimes
- d) Often

1) 先生の英語で言っていることが解らない時は、ストレスとフラストレーションを感じる。

- a) 全くない
- b) あんまりない
- c) 時々
- d) よくある

2) 私は、日本語で先生に質問できることはいいと思う。

- a) 全くいらなと思う
- b) あんまりいらなと思う
- c) 時々できたらいいと思う
- d) いつでもできたらいいと思う

3) 授業内容以外のことを英語で先生に質問するのは、緊張する。(例えば、試験や出席日数についてなど)

- a) 全くそう思わない
- b) あんまりそう思わない
- c) 時々そう思う
- d) よくそう思う

4) I let the teacher know when I don't understand something.

- a) Never
- b) Rarely
- c) Sometimes
- d) Often

4) 私は、何か解らない事があった時、先生に質問をしている。

- a) 全くしてない
- b) あまりしてない
- c) 時々してる
- d) よくしてる

Student Expectations About Learning

1) To learn effectively, I think I should be able to understand what the teacher is saying _____% of the time.

- A) up to 70% of the time
- B) from 70 to 85% of the time
- C) from 85 to 100% of the time
- D) 100% of the time

1) 能率的に学ぶためには、先生の言っていることが、最低____%は解ったほうがいいと思う。

- A) 70%以下
- B) 70 - 85%
- C) 85 - 100%
- D) 100%

2) I usually understand what the teacher is saying in English about _____% of the time.

- A) up to 70% of the time
- B) from 70 to 85% of the time
- C) from 85 to 100% of the time
- D) 100% of the time

2) たいてい先生が英語で言っていることは____%のときぐらい分かります。

- A) 70%以下
- B) 70 - 85%
- C) 85 - 100%
- D) 100%

3) To learn effectively students in class should try to speak in English :

- A) only when asked;
- B) just for practicing target language;
- C) as much as they are confident with;
- D) for almost everything they say

3) 授業中に生徒が英語を使ったほうがいいのは____時だけ。

- A) 先生の指示がある時だけ。
- B) 授業内容の練習の時だけ。
- C) できるだけたくさん使っている
- D) ほとんど英語を使えばいい。

4) In my actual classes I try to speak English:

- A) only when asked;
- B) just for practicing target language;
- C) as much as I am confident with;
- D) for almost everything I say

4) 実際に私が英語で話しているのは。

- A) 先生の指示がある
- B) 授業内容の練習の時だけ
- C) できるだけたくさん使う。
- D) ほとんど英語を使う

Teachers' use of L1 in the classroom

1) How often do you like the teacher to use Japanese in class?

(Circle a, b, c or d)

- a) Never
(I like teachers to explain only by gestures, pictures and simple English.)
- b) Rarely
(I only like teachers to use Japanese if it is a very important point that we cannot understand even after the teacher has tried to communicate it in various ways.)
- c) Sometimes
(I like teachers to give a short and quick explanation in Japanese when we can't understand something.)
- d) Always
(I prefer a teacher to always give a Japanese explanation, so that I am completely sure that I have understood properly.)

2) When they speak, how often should teachers in class speak in English.

- A) up to 70% of the time
- B) from 70 to 85% of the time
- C) from 85 to 100% of the time
- D) 100% of the time

3) How often do you like Japanese to be used for the following purposes?

Answer descriptions

- (a) Never
(I like teachers to explain only by gestures, pictures and simple English.)
- b) Rarely
(I only like teachers to use Japanese if it is a very important point that we cannot understand even after the teacher has tried to communicate it in various ways.)
- c) Sometimes
(I like teachers to give a short and quick explanation in Japanese when we can't understand something.)
- d) Always
(I prefer a teacher to always give a Japanese explanation, so that I am completely sure that I have understood properly.)

i) Class overview/marks/homework explanation

- a) Never

1) どのぐらい教室で日本語をしゃべりたいと思いますか?

(a か b か c か d を○書いて下さい)

- a) 全然使わないでほしい。私はジェスチャーや絵や簡単な英語を使って説明する先生が好きだ。
- b) 色んな方法を使ってもわからなかった重要な部分の説明の場合に、日本語を使う先生が好きだ。
- c) 何かわからなかった時に、日本語で短く簡単な説明をくれる先生が好きだ。
- d) 完璧に理解できたか確認できる為に、いつも日本語で説明してほしい。

2) 先生が授業中に英語を話す割合は、何%がいいと思いますか?

- A) 70%以下
- B) 70—85%
- C) 85—100%
- D) 100%

3) もし先生が日本語を使うとしたら、どんな時に使ってほしいと思いますか?

答えの説明

- a) 全然使わないでほしい。私はジェスチャーや絵や簡単な英語を使って説明する先生が好きだ。
- b) 色んな方法を使ってもわからなかった重要な部分の説明の場合に、日本語を使う先生が好きだ。
- c) 何かわからなかった時に、日本語で短く簡単な説明をくれる先生が好きだ。
- d) 完璧に理解できたか確認できる為に、いつも日本語で説明してほしい。

次の i) から iv) の質問は前の a) b)

c) d) の答えを選んでください。

- a) Never
- b) Rarely
- c) Sometimes
- d) Always

ii) Game/activity procedures and rules

- a) Never
- b) Rarely
- c) Sometimes
- d) Always

iii) Vocabulary translation

- a) Never
- b) Rarely
- c) Sometimes
- d) Always

iv) Grammar explanation/translation

- a) Never
- b) Rarely
- c) Sometimes
- d) Always

i) 授業内容以外の説明のとき (シラバス、宿題、試験など)

- a) b) c) d)

ii) ゲームや活動の説明の時

- a) b) c) d)

iii) 単語の翻訳と説明の時

- a) b) c) d)

iv) 文法の説明や翻訳のとき

- a) b) c) d)

4) 意見があれば何でも書いて下さい
