

As Much English as Possible

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There is, at the moment, a change coming over the world of English teaching. For roughly the past 100 years, since the advent of the Direct Method, the use of the English learners' own language, the L1, has been avoided in many classrooms. However, this is seemingly coming to an end. Although many native teachers of English still feel guilty about using their students' native languages, many writers, such as Stephens (2006), Storch and Wigglesworth (2003), and Auerbach (1993), are now coming to a different conclusion. They believe that, at times, speaking to language learners in their own language, and letting the language learners occasionally speak in their own language, is acceptable.

For most native English-speaking university English teachers in Japan, in most teaching situations, the job at hand is getting their Japanese students, who have spent years studying English, but very little time using it, to use English productively. Common sense tells us, therefore, that students should be given as much class time as possible actually using English. However, as most native English-speaking university teachers have lived in Japan for many years and have for the most part acquired a speaking knowledge of Japanese, the question arises as to whether or not these teachers should use this knowledge as a tool of instruction. As this paper will argue, a limited use of Japanese within the EFL classroom is in fact the common sense approach.

English Only

As Hosoda points out "...the...[target language]...-only is still so powerful that EFL/ESL teachers who admit that they use the students' L1 in their classes are usually apologetic" (2000, p. 69-70). The question is why, and the answer is historical, pedagogical, traditional, and even ideological.

Perhaps the main reason that the language learners' L1 has often been avoided in the classroom can be seen in the history of methodology. Since the Reform Movement in the late nineteenth century (Howatt, 1984. p135) most language teachers have emphasized the use of the target language (TL) within the classroom. This can be seen as a reaction to the Grammar Translation method, in which use of the language was secondary to grammar knowledge. The Direct Method, which followed, sought to emulate the learning of the students' first language "emphasizing the avoidance of translation and the direct use of the foreign language as a medium of instruction in all situations" (Cummins, 2008, p. 66). Many other methods, such as Audio-Lingualism, have followed, but all have been influenced by the notion that the first

language was best avoided. The communicative language approaches that are with us today have followed this thinking.

Japan presents a special case. Japanese English teachers have traditionally used very little English in class and foreign teachers have often come to Japan not so much as teachers of English but as models of English use. As Stephens (2006) points out, the perceived roles of Japanese and native English-speaking teachers are that the Japanese teachers speak Japanese and the native English-speaking teachers speak English.

This dichotomy reflects the beliefs about the acquisition of English; the JTE's role is considered to be the explanation of grammatical rules of English, while the NS' role is to facilitate communication in spoken language. Hence students are presented with models of teachers who almost exclusively use their own L1 (p. 14).

While this dichotomy exists primarily at the junior or senior high school levels, it is true to a lesser extent at the university level as well.

There is a more cynical, though in many cases perhaps true, reason for 'English only' and this is that many native speaking teachers have traditionally not been able to speak the L1 of the language learners. As Harbord writes "The development of ELT as a casual career for young people visiting Europe encouraged teachers to make a virtue of the necessity of using only English" (1992, p. 350). This is less true of university teachers in Japan simply because they have usually made a career of teaching and been exposed to Japanese much longer, but as an explanation of why 'English Only' exists, it is a reasonable argument.

Auerbach (1993) writes that there is an ideological reason for 'English only' as well. Her paper concerns ESL education in the United States, but it is likely that thinking there had an effect on English education around the world. As she explains, language education in the States was historically often bilingual, but anti-foreign sentiment changed this.

It was the resurgence of nativism and antiforeign political sentiment in the late 19th century that signaled the decline of bilingual education. The advent of World War 1, the increase in immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe, and the growing role of immigrants in the labor movement contributed to an increasingly xenophobic atmosphere in the early 20th century (p. 12).

This has only an indirect connection to university English education in Japan, but it helps to explain why the native language has been avoided in the classroom until recently.

Use of the L1 is Being Reassessed

Many people are reconsidering the strictures of “English Only” in English language classrooms, however. The Grammar-Translation method employed almost no target language, the Direct Method avoided the use of the native language, and now some theorists have come to believe that limited amounts of the native language are acceptable. The pendulum has swung back, somewhat, from its extreme position. There are a number of reasons for this.

In learning situations such as Japanese universities, where the students share a native language, the L1 can be used to explain the target language at a level not possible with the target language itself. In this way, the students’ knowledge of their own language and grammar is seen as a tool for aiding the acquisition of the target language. As Storch and Wigglesworth (2003) explain “...the use of the L1 may provide learners with additional cognitive support that allows them to analyse language and work at a higher level than would be possible were they restricted to the sole use of their L2” (p. 760). While the focus of the class is still use of the target language, limited amounts of L1 use can help students to comprehend the new language.

Other writers have discussed the value of using the students’ native language to help reduce stress in the classroom, and this seems to be a valid argument, particularly for lower level students. If the student’s first language is in effect banned in the classroom, students can feel unable to express themselves and helpless, which is not conducive to learning. As Klevberg (2010) explains, use of the students’ native language helps in “relaxing students and provides a more positive learning environment” (p. 4).

Researchers are also responding to the desire by students for some use of their native language. According to research conducted by both Burden (2001) and Critchley (1999), Japanese university students are in favor of the limited use of Japanese in their English language classrooms. Burden surveyed 290 students and found that 73 percent wanted L1 use sometimes. Similarly, in Critchley’s survey of 160 students, it was found that 87 percent thought that the occasional use of Japanese foreign teachers was positive.

In limited amounts and controlled circumstances, there are several effective ways that Japanese can be used in the EFL classroom. One particularly effective use of Japanese is for translation. Most textbooks on the market today are monolingual. When difficult sentences are introduced in the text, it is often useful to ask the students to translate them into Japanese to assure that there is comprehension. Unfortunately, the mention of translation immediately draws negative associations with the Grammar-Translation method, which is unfortunate, because in its essence, it can be effective. As Howatt (1984) explains in his *A History of English Language Teaching*, it was later derivations from the original intent that created such a negative backlash towards the Grammar-Translation method.

Intrinsically...the method is so ordinary that it is sometimes difficult to see what all the fuss was about. Each new lesson had one or two new grammar rules, a short vocabulary list, and some practice examples to translate. Boring, maybe, but hardly the horror story that we are sometimes asked to believe. However, it also contained the seeds which eventually grew into a jungle of obscure rules, endless lists of gender classes and gender-class exceptions, self-conscious 'literary' archaisms, snippets of philology, and a total loss of feeling for living language (Howatt, 1984, p. 136).

Translation should not be a toxic word to language teachers, therefore. The question really is: how else can a teacher ascertain whether something difficult is understood? In a large classroom of students it is impossible to check whether each student can use new constructions correctly. The translation of single sentences by the class, or in situations where students are unable to do so, by the teacher, is also a naturally limited use which does not lead to uncontrolled use of the L1 by the class.

Using translation is effective not only as a means of ensuring comprehension, but also as a method of getting students to notice the similarities and differences between the L1 and L2, which encourages language transfer. As Cummins (2008) writes, "...instruction should explicitly attempt to activate students' prior knowledge" (p. 68). In other words, students bring a deep knowledge of language use to the classroom because of their L1, and teachers should not only acknowledge but make use of this. Asking students to relate the L1 and L2 can positively encourage L2 acquisition.

The most common use of L1 in English language classrooms is most likely the teacher translating words or even sentences for students when they do not know how to express themselves in the L2. This can be a very effective method of instruction because the language learner learns exactly the new vocabulary that they want to communicate. Not allowing students to use their L1 in this capacity would seem almost misguided, and it is likely that many teachers allow L1 use in this way.

There are several occasions when it may be appropriate for the teacher to address the class in the L1. Most of these are situations in which a failure to comprehend on the part of the student would have dire consequences, for example, when explaining tests or classroom policies. It is simply unfair if a student does poorly on a test simply because they did not understand an L2 explanation. Further, if there are classroom policies involving lateness or absences, it is again essential that all students have complete understanding of the policy.

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There are valid reasons for a native English-speaking teacher at a Japanese university

to use Japanese in the classroom. However, in most situations, the teacher's job is to help students become effective at communicating in English, and for this reason, any L1 use should be limited. Generally speaking, the students' only exposure to communicating in English is in the classroom and so every opportunity should be taken for students to do so.

Allowing students to use Japanese in the classroom can have unintended consequences in that the amount of Japanese used can easily snowball if the teacher does not carefully control it. Speaking in a second language is a difficult, often embarrassing task. Many students, rather than go through this mild form of agony, would prefer to communicate in Japanese. Allowing students to speak Japanese only in certain circumstances requires diligence and skill on the part of the teacher.

While it can be effective for native English-speaking teachers to use limited amounts of Japanese in addressing their classes, it is easy to use more than is absolutely necessary. Most Japanese university students, though they have spent at least six years studying English, are incapable of carrying out a coherent conversation in English. Many struggle with simple greetings. On the other hand, as noted, most native English-speaking teachers in Japan can speak Japanese to some extent. This can create a conundrum. Although their job is to teach Japanese language learners to speak English, the easiest means of communication is in Japanese, and this in turn creates a temptation for teachers to use more Japanese in class than they should. People naturally desire to communicate with each other, and the easiest path for this to take place is through Japanese.

It is, in a sense, more difficult to allow limited amounts of Japanese in the classroom than none at all. The teacher has to control the class carefully. On the other hand, not allowing any Japanese at all disregards important opportunities for learning.

Conclusion

The Grammar Translation method used very little target language in the classroom while the Direct Method, and other communicative methods that have followed, attempted to avoid any use of the language learner's L1. Today, a middle ground or compromise seems like a sensible choice. A limited use of the language learner's native language can help comprehension, reduce stress and encourage language transfer. However, language learners in Japan and elsewhere often have few chances to use English outside of the classroom, and this means that every opportunity has to be given to encourage the language learner to actually use English. As well, the knowledge advantage that native English-speaking university teachers in Japan usually have, in the sense that they often speak Japanese better than the language learners speak English, has to be kept in check. To coin a phrase, it can often be a slippery slope once a teacher begins using the language learner's L1 in the classroom. The teacher has to draw a line and

insist that, while some Japanese is permitted, the class rule is: As much English as possible.

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