

Responses and Attitudes of Japanese Students of Management to the Use of L1 in Business English Classes

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Abstract

In the area of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) instruction, use of the learners' mother tongue has been debated for a long time. This debate has been especially prominent in the literature on pedagogy since 1987, when Atkinson started an ongoing discussion on the subject. The subsequent exchange of views-whether the mother tongue should or should not be used in EFL classrooms-has never ceased to attract attention. EFL practitioners in various parts of the world seem to be concerned with this question and are trying to answer it for themselves. This paper is an attempt to contribute to this discussion while looking into the use of the mother tongue in EFL classes taught at a Japanese business university.

Views and opinions on the problem of L1 use vary greatly. Gill (2005) called the variety of viewpoints 'a spectrum', at one end of which there are those who reject the use of L1 or fail to see any significant potential in it. At the other end are those who either overuse L1 themselves or support those learners who do so.

Indeed, for an extended period of time it has been assumed that English had to be learnt through English, and not by the use of L1. The latter had to be forbidden in the classroom. As Bouangeune (2009) pointed out, many instructors of English wondered whether students could truly appreciate target language exchanges if they were constantly relying on their mother tongue. In addition, prolonged dominance of Grammar-Translation method resulted in labeling L1 as worthless, boring, pointless, and irrelevant for communication in the target language (Harmer, 2001). Krashen (1982), focusing on the importance of input for language acquisition, led educators to believe that L1 could only obstruct the development of learners' ability to produce meaningful output.

However, in recent years, educators in English-speaking countries, who provide the major bulk of English-language research publications, came to realize that SL (second language) acquisition and FL (foreign language) study are not synonymous terms and have to be approached differently. This realization resulted in a number of papers focusing on EFL classrooms and EFL learners. Ellis (2007) summed up these publications and explicitly identified the major difference between ESL education and EFL education: namely, that unlike the former, the latter does not strive to achieve native-like cultural and pragmatic competence or to subdue learners' own ethnic identities.

According to Ellis (Ibid.), learners' identities play the pivotal role in language learning. The importance of a foreign language for the learners is determined by the identity the learners wish to assume. In his view, whether the learners see the foreign language as a part of their identity (like those in the Nordic countries and in the Netherlands) or not (the UK, France, Japan, and the USA), determines their success in learning.

Learners' identity, however, might not be the only driving force in an EFL classroom. Immediate or long-term goals and needs can act as motivational factors in foreign language acquisition. Ellis (Ibid.) primarily focused on foreign language classroom settings (the L1 status in the country, the qualification of teachers, and the quality of curricula). However, personal goals and needs related to future career and other opportunities, appear to be just as important in determining learners' attitudes to EFL study. For instance, prospects of better employment options can compensate for uninspiring or inadequate classroom settings and contribute greatly to success in learning.

The focus on learners, their identities, and needs signals a major paradigm shift that has taken place in EFL education in the recent years. Rather than concentrating on the process of learning the target language and trying to shape it according to the norms used in teaching migrants in English-speaking countries, educators came to recognize EFL learners as having their own identities.

Due to this shift, a renewed interest in the use of L1 resulted in a number of research papers that describe certain advantages that the mother tongue presents. Supporters of its use in EFL classrooms claim that the mother tongue plays an important role in foreign language acquisition. For instance, Tang considered negative attitudes towards L1 'misconceptions' on the basis of a study that was conducted in a Chinese university (2002). This study proved that L1 played only a supportive and facilitating role when used by instructors of English majors in the first year of the university program. Even such highly motivated learners as the subjects of the study, felt that their L1 was helping them to learn English better (Tang, 2002).

In addition, Sharma (2006) reported that the use of L1 was approved by Nepalese high school students and teachers. They appreciated its use as a useful means of clarification and explanation. Sharma (Ibid.) concludes that prohibition of L1 in EFL classrooms can deprive learners of opportunities to improve their English skills. Interestingly, this author mentions another use of the mother tongue: that of establishing closer relationships between students and teachers.

In another study, adult Czech learners of English (military personnel) were observed in classroom situations (Temerová, 2009). The study demonstrated that target language alone proved inadequate in achieving comprehension. In particular, beginners and pre-intermediate level students were characterized as dependent on the teacher's explanation in mother tongue (Temerová, 2009). The native language was also used as a tool for analyzing problems, expressing opinions, developing ideas, reflecting on the similarities and differences between the two languages (Ibid). Moreover, Temerová concluded that the mother tongue helped to reduce learners' anxiety and uncertainty about their comprehension and to motivate them to further study, a point also made in a Turkish study of university freshmen taking EFL classes.

Kahraman's data showed that the presence "of the students' mother tongue reduces anxiety, and enhances affective environment for learning a foreign language" (Kahraman; 2009, p. 108). Furthermore, Kahraman expressed the following opinion: "the acceptance and valuing of students' mother tongue in EFL classroom will increase their openness to learning the target language; and the optimal L1 use, i.e. active, systematic and judicious use of the mother tongue in an EFL setting, will reduce anxiety, increase and class participation, and enhance an affective environment for

learning a second/foreign language” (2009, p. 112).

In Saudi Arabia, Al-Nofaie (2010) conducted a case study involving female school students who were taking intermediate level English classes. The results of this study indicated that both teachers and students approved of L1 being used in class, though for somewhat different purposes. The students reported their preference of L1 for the reasons such as stress reduction, quick and clear explanation of difficult points in the lesson, and, above all, contrastive analysis of English and L1 (Arabic). The author even suggested that such analysis be included in teacher-training programs in Saudi Arabia, despite the teachers’ reluctance to use such analysis. Overall, concluded Al-Nofaie (Ibid.), the use of L1 had to be coordinated with needs of learners.

Another recent study was obviously prompted by the shift of attention towards L1. It was undertaken in a Palestinian university by Jadallah and Hasan (2010). They tried to determine how the mother tongue could be utilized to enhance EFL education. Their survey of EFL instructors demonstrated that all of the native speakers of English and 62.5% of non-native speakers of English were in favor of using L1 (Arabic) in teaching English vocabulary and grammar constructions to Palestinian tertiary students (Jadallah and Hasan; 2010).

In Pakistan, Gulzar and Qadir surveyed EFL educators from various areas of the country and found the following:

1. Teachers approved of the judicious use of mother tongue.
2. Code-switching was deemed important for improving the teachers’ performance.
3. Code-switching was perceived as a necessary technique.
4. Educators emphasized importance of understanding the reasons for code-switching (2010).

The authors concluded that code-switching had to be recognized as a part of ELT methodology. At the same time, they emphasized differing opinions in regards to code-switching and remarked: “the issue of code-switching and use of L1 is not properly addressed at the level of the policy makers” and suggested that a policy be developed in order to create a balance between L1 and the target language, but that this balance should reflect the level and requirements of the learners (Gulzar and Qadir; 2010, p. 416).

In another account, Lynch (2011) stated that working knowledge of Spanish helped him to achieve the following in teaching Colombian EFL students: clarification of meaning in regard to English vocabulary and grammar items, avoidance of misunderstanding while giving instructions, and the dynamic flow of activities. In addition, Lynch emphasized the role L1 played in teaching his learners in ‘remedial’ classes: these learners positively responded to the use of L1 in the activities tailored to individual learning needs (Ibid.).

Research efforts conducted in various countries proved the importance of the focus on L1 and its impact on EFL education. These efforts were noticed and appreciated by educators in Japan. The latter have been actively enquiring about the role of the students’ mother tongue in EFL settings. One of them, the educator and a textbook writer Critchley (2002) described L1 as an important means of support provided to Japanese students. Like many others, Critchley wondered about the appropriate balance between English and Japanese in classrooms and concluded that learners had to be consulted in such situations (Ibid.). He recommended that teachers of false-

beginner university students ensure a great deal of Japanese support be given at the beginning of a course and reduced gradually as the learners become more accustomed to communicating and learning through English. According to Critchley, by the end of the course, teachers should aim for less than 25% Japanese support from ‘teacher talk’, less than 35% from ‘student talk’, and less than 40% from instructional materials. However, teachers may find that their learners require more or less support depending on the needs, wants and proficiency of the learners, the beliefs of the teacher, the focus of the lesson, and the function of the interactions taking place (Ibid.).

In another paper, Yonesaka (2005) described a variety of situations when EFL teachers resort to code-switching and noted that the latter could be purposeful or non-purposeful (habitual, automatic, or competence-related). She suggested that teachers use self-analysis to determine the balance of English and Japanese for themselves.

Ford expressed his support of L1 citing both theoretical and practical considerations: the current changes in pedagogical trends on the one hand and, on the other, the declining level of academic skills of Japanese university freshmen (Ford; 2009). He listed a number of important features of EFL settings in Japanese universities: lack of opportunity to use English outside classrooms; the preceding six years of English study dedicated to preparation for university entrance exams; having to take English classes regardless of personal interest or study major (Ibid.). These features have to be taken into consideration by educators in order to tune their instruction accordingly.

Another essential consideration should be made, according to Ford (Ibid.), in respect of the learners’ freedom of choice and individual learning preferences. Ford argued that enforcing strictly an English-only policy in class and demanding that students use English-only dictionaries represent dictatorial attitudes and does not agree with the learner-centered approach (Ibid.).

Having interviewed ten teachers-native speakers, Ford (Ibid.) concluded that they were aware of “the need for a flexible and pragmatic approach, especially concerning student L1 use, depending on student level, motivation, and nature of class content” (p. 15).

Despite the general understanding of the fact that the use of L1 exclusively serves the learners’ needs, research in L1 use in Japan appears to be mainly focused on teachers’ views and beliefs in regard to the matter, their ideas of the right balance in code-switching, etc. A different approach was taken by Shimizu (2006), who studied attitudes of both teachers and students to the use of Japanese in EFL classrooms. She surveyed university students (both English majors and non-majors) in various years of study (from freshmen to graduating students) and found the following: 73% of English majors and 94% of non-majors approved of L1 use by teachers in class.

As for the instructors, 68% of those characterized L1 use as necessary, while 28% noted that relevant decisions had to be made on the grounds of the course objectives and learners’ proficiency level (Shimizu, 2006). Interestingly, the most supportive of L1 use students were the advanced ones with the highest TOEIC score in the entire pool. These students were aiming at becoming translators and interpreters, so they viewed translating and code switching as important skills (Ibid.). Students with lower proficiency reported feelings of anxiety and uncertainty caused by English-only lessons. They wanted to be able to confirm correct understanding of class content before

moving on. Overall, both students and teachers appreciated the use of Japanese for instructions, explanation of complicated linguistic phenomena, and comprehension confirmation (Ibid.).

Shimizu's study stood out against the background of teacher-focused studies. It broke away from the tendency to overlook learners and their needs.

The overview of the abovementioned studies seems to suggest that a systematic approach to the matter is required. I suggest the following approach for deciding on L1 use in learner-centered EFL instruction:

1. In learner-centered teaching, students are the ones who should decide whether there is some need for their mother tongue to be used in class.

2. While deciding how (to what extent and in what situations) L1 should be used in EFL classrooms, it is important to consult the learners and use their attitudes and beliefs as the main guide. Teachers should not approach the matter "judiciously" and set percentages for L1 use or list relevant situations - this contradicts the idea of learner-centered instruction.

3. When a foreign EFL instructor has differing views from those of the learners, it is advisable to consider the learners' views in the context of their cultural and educational background.

The Japanese studies of L1 in EFL education, as well as the research conducted around the world, prompted a study in Nagoya University of Business and Commerce. The study was an attempt to contribute to the student-centered research on the subject of L1 use in Japanese EFL classrooms. It was conducted in a form of an informal survey. Seventy-three freshmen studying at the Department of Management and taking an introductory Business English course as the only foreign language component of their curriculum, participated in this survey.

The purpose of the survey was to find out whether the students believed that their mother tongue needed to be used during English lessons. All seventy-three respondents answered positively and stated that they believed that hearing explanations in their mother tongue was important for them because it enabled them to follow the lesson. They emphasized the fact that understanding English was difficult for them and they depended greatly on translation and culture-related comments.

Next, the respondents were requested to list situations in which they needed most L1 support. The following situations were mentioned:

- 1) When difficult vocabulary is introduced;
- 2) When listening comprehension exercises involve business context (office talk, etc);
- 3) When grammar rules are introduced;
- 4) When reading comprehension items are based on other countries' culture;
- 5) When it is important to differentiate between formal and informal expressions;
- 6) When assignments and instructions are given.

The unanimous agreement on the L1 use in English lessons does not come as a surprise if one considers the educational and cultural background of Japanese university freshmen.

First of all, the motivation for learning EFL in Japan is low, as English is not indispensable for communication within the community. The only practical use of learning English is for entrance examinations, hence studying English is a tedious task for most school students. By the time they

become university freshmen, a lot of young Japanese people despair of ever becoming proficient in English. For them, obviously, their mother tongue offers ‘a lifeline’ and they appreciate and cherish this support. This fact has to be taken into consideration by foreign instructors of EFL and made a priority over their own beliefs and attitudes, if they adhere to the idea of learner-centered instruction.

The survey has its limitations as every small-scale study conducted in one educational institution. However, it confirms the necessity of enquiring into the learners’ beliefs and attitudes to the use of their mother tongue. Teacher beliefs alone cannot be sufficient for creating a comfortable learner-centered classroom environment for students. This point has been supported by EFL researchers in Japan as well as around the world.

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