The Use of Students’ L1 in the ESL/EFL Classroom and the Role of the Native Speaking Teacher of English

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Abstract

This article explores the concerns regarding the use of students’ L1, Japanese, within the parameters of university level ESL/EFL classrooms. This review of research explores the ongoing debate from both sides of the argument. The inadequacies of language immersion defined as prescriptive teaching, problems concerning students’ beliefs, attitudes, and motivations regarding language immersion, pros and cons of bilingual classroom dynamics, and the role of native speaking teachers of English (NSTE) within the current structure of Japanese academia will all be discussed. This exploration as well brings to light areas for further research regarding the efficacy of utilizing the students’ L1 in an artificially constructed immersion environment.

Keywords: ESL/EFL classrooms, language of instruction, prescriptive learning, use of L1, language immersion, role of native speaking teacher of English, NSTE
要 旨

本論文では、大学レベルでのESL/EFLの教室という条件範囲の中で、生徒のL1（日本語）の使用に関する懸念を探究する。この研究レビューでは、論拠の双方の面から継続中の議論を探る。規範的指導として定義される言語イマージョンの不備、言語イマージョンについて学生の信念や態度、動機に関する問題点、バイリンガル教室のダイナミクスの長所と短所、及び日本の学界で現在構造されている英語のネイティブスピーカー教師（NSTE）の役割、すべて検討する。なお、この調査は、人為的に構築されたイマージョン環境の中で学生のL1を利用することの有効性に関するさらなる研究についても明らかにする。

キーワード：言語学習環境（ESL/EFLの教室）、指導言語、規範的学習、第1言語の使用、言語イマージョン、英語のネイティブスピーカー教師の役割

Considerations in Opposition of a Bilingual ESL/EFL Classroom Environment

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In modern Japan, native speaking teachers of English (NSTE) who also have a fairly high level of fluency in the Japanese Language are at times met with an air of skepticism and apprehension in regards to their usefulness in classes aimed at maximizing students’ exposure to the target language (TL). Although this is at times a disheartening situation for a NSTE who is eager to use their bilingual abilities as a bridge to communicate cross-cultural insights from their native English, an instructor’s use of the students’ native language (L1) is not an entirely unfounded concern on the part of the ESL/EFL academic community. The following exploration of this topic will attempt to address some of the negative effects of using the students’ L1 in the classroom as perceived in Japan’s current ESL/EFL climate.

The most prominent concern held by the academic community in Japan is that of students’ exposure to the target language. In research exploring students’ perceptions of teachers’ language use in an EFL classroom, Tsukamoto (2011) highlights that this concern is in accordance with the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Technology and Science (MEXT) which announced as a curriculum objective that class instructions and activities should be taught in English so as to maximize the students’ exposure to the target language. Therefore it is to be expected that the NSTE make a concerted effort to maximize students’ exposure to the target language. Supporters of this monolingual approach to language acquisition, in which the students’ L1 is explicitly avoided, include such researchers as Littlewood (1981), Krashen (1987), and Turnbull (2001).

Should it be the case that the sole purpose of the NSTE is to be merely a walking language emersion opportunity, then the employment of such an educator fluent in the use of the students’ primary language (L1) is flawed on a theoretical level. Viewed thusly a bilingual NSTE may even be regarded by some in the academic community as wholly counter productive to the students’ mastering
of the target language. This speculation calls into question whether it is the role of the NSTE to simply provide English conversation, or if the NSTE is, in addition to the former, as well a cross-cultural resource able to empower students with greater confidence and a deeper insight into their target language, English, through deeper and more meaningful bilingual discussions. Arguments could be made in correction of such a seemingly flat view of language acquisition. This is a question that needs more thorough investigation that will unfortunately not be covered in the scope of this research.

At present the focus remains the original investigation concerning the possible negative effects of NSTE possessing a high fluency in the students’ L1. A NSTE inclined to employ the students’ L1 in situations of comprehensive difficulty may be unwitting doing the students a disservice by offering this assistance. As most people have a tendency to find the easiest way to accomplish their goals, in principle EFL students are no different. Should a NSTE develop classroom habits in which a verbal translation of lesson or activity instructions from the target language to the students’ L1 on a regular basis, then the students may in many cases acclimate to this crutch and challenge themselves progressively less. As opposed to taking it upon themselves to decode the NSTE’s initial instructions presented to them in the target language, students may disengage during this crucial listening opportunity and opt to wait for the NSTE to translate the instructions into their L1. Thus, if the students become aware of the NSTE’s fluency in their L1, similar behaviors may occur during other class activities. This is echoed in Littlewood’s research in which it is claimed that if teachers stray from using the target language, students will not be convinced of the target language’s efficacy as a means of communication (1992, p. 45). In other words, the NSTE’s well-intentioned bilingual explanation may indeed become a crutch that could impede some students’ progress.

When considering the use of the students’ L1 in the EFL classroom, it’s also crucial to consider the development of task/activity discussion habits. Although the use of L1 can be highly beneficial in the transmission of vocabulary and grammar points (especially in regards to low level or underprepared students), as is discussed in Atkinson’s (1987) exploration of reasons for allowing limited use of L1 in EFL classrooms, there remains the problem of the L1 becoming predominant in discussion activities.

In this researcher’s personal experience, even after belaboring the importance of thinking and discussing activities and reading comprehension points in the target language, all too often is it found that students will eagerly slip back into their L1 to discuss and clarify what has been read. Although this method of discussion holds the possibility of solidifying students’ comprehension of the lesson material through sparing use of their L1, it also allows for possibility of the target language to become eclipsed in a discuss format.

Another issue that may pose problematic with NSTE possessing a high fluency in the students’ L1 is that of visiting students from an altogether different linguistic background. To exemplify this point we can again look at modern Japanese university classes. In a study by the Central Council
for Education (2008) it was found that more than 60% of university teachers in Japan have concerns regarding the decline of students’ academic abilities. And there are furthermore students who enter universities without having mastered fundamental English skills (Ford, 2009). These discrepancies become highlighted in EFL classrooms containing both Japanese and international students. Universities in Japan cater to international students from many varying countries and cultural settings. These students have no doubt come to strengthen their understanding of both Japan’s rich culture as well as its expressive language. But, what happens when these visiting international students find themselves in an English class where their Japanese peers are near fully reliant on the NSTE’s high fluency in their L1, Japanese, as opposed to the expected target language, English? One could imagine that this scenario would be troubling for the visiting international student, the struggling Japanese student of English, as well as the NSTE who has developed teaching habits that center on the heavy usage of the Japanese students’ L1 in order to transmit English concepts in class.

This brief exploration concerning the negative aspects of NSTE with a high fluency in the students’ L1 has lead this researcher to hold the opinion that maximizing the students exposure to the target language is of premiere importance. Tsukamoto’s (2011) study, which explores this issue from the point of view of a Japanese teacher of English, found that students “seemed to be pleased to be able to practice their speaking and/or to develop their listening skills” (p. 152), and perhaps the teacher holds more importance as a “role model”. Of course in Tsukamoto’s study the “role model” was that of a Japanese teacher with a high fluency in English. But with the notion of a “role model” in mind, let us return to the question of the NSTEs’ overall role in the ESL/EFL educational setting. It was previously stated in the course of this writing that in many situations the NSTE is expected to be no more than a walking conversation opportunity. If this is to be the lens through which the role of these educators are to be viewed, then it would seem that a complete lack of knowledge in regards to the students’ L1 would in fact be of benefit to the classroom environment. However, when objectively viewed, this approach seems to be analogous to trying to fit the proverbial square peg into a round hole. In many instances, unless the students are already of a fairly high fluency in the target language, an overwhelming amount of information that is crucial to their success in a given course may be processed by their limited listening abilities as unintelligible babble. Such a situation would be understandably frustrating for struggling students, and could discourage further interest in learning the target language. It seems logical that there is a place in the ESL/EFL classroom for the NSTE with a high fluency in the students’ L1. Not that the NSTE should focus efforts on translating lessons into the students L1; on the contrary it would seem that maximizing exposure to the target language is still of premier importance. But, perhaps these educators are of benefit to students both by ensuring that students understand the learning tasks and as an exemplary figure: a non-Japanese who has succeeded in the challenge of acquiring a high fluency in the students’ L1. In this researcher’s opinion, that could be the difference between students developing a view of English as a “second language” as opposed to
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seeing it as a “foreign language”.

Considerations for in Support of a Bilingual ESL/EFL Classroom Environment

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Language immersion may not be the best foreign language teaching method, especially in a predominately homogenous classroom where all of the students speak the same primary language (L1) for two main reasons. First, language immersion, defined as prescriptive teaching, opposes many of the students’ learning styles and choices. Second, students struggle with beliefs, attitudes, and motivation concerning language immersion.

Students’ learning styles and choices should be taken into consideration when devising a teaching method. Peter Burden’s studies, “The Use of Only English” (2000) and “Attitude Change Toward the Use of Japanese in a University English Conversation Class” (2004), point out that beginner students need to be taught more in their L1 than advanced students. Burden has dedicated his time, through his research and publications, convincing other instructors to break free of traditional immersion techniques and concentrate more on students’ needs. Burden was motivated to research best practices for second-language acquisition after reading the results of a survey carried out by the Japanese Education Ministry in 1997, where only 24% of students were satisfied with class content and only 19% were satisfied with the instructors’ methods of instruction (2000). He argues that proponents of traditional language-learning pedagogy have made many claims about the use of the students’ L1 in monolingual classrooms, but they fail to receive insight into the students’ difficulties. Burden points out 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 (2000, p. 140).” Burden asked a fellow instructor about results from an immersion style class, and his colleague stated the following: “There was very little natural communication between myself and the learners, especially after class,” ... “perhaps my pedagogical ‘English only’ beliefs had erected a barrier” (2000, p. 140).

In both questionnaires, an average of 92% of students said that the instructor should know and understand the students’ L1. Burden proposes that instructors do not need to actually speak the students’ L1 aloud in class. However, if instructors are able to understand students’ questions, then they can respond appropriately and supportively in the target language (TL) further “building on the students’ current linguistic repertoire and interests” (2004, p. 33). At the beginning of the semester, 89% of the students said they should be allowed to speak their L1 in class. At the end of the semester, that percentage dropped to 79%. Burden concludes that some students come to understand the importance of using the TL inside the classroom as the semester progresses (2004).

Burden uses these figures to illustrate that students in a typical university class in Japan consider
the use of their L1 to be an aid to mastering the TL. He also invites practicing instructors to seek students’ opinions when addressing styles and methods of teaching. Many arguments against the use of the students’ L1 are “often on pedagogical and prescriptive grounds without due consideration to the other stakeholders in the educational process, the students themselves” (Burden, 2000, p. 147).

Alastair Pennycook (1998), a researcher on linguistic imperialism, believes that monolingual teaching of the TL has always been staunchly accepted due to a natural dominance of the European over non-European languages. With this in mind, Burden encourages instructors to find a more humanistic approach toward the needs and values of the students, their culture, and their language, as opposed to creating a “little corner of an English-speaking country” in the classroom (2000, p. 147).

In Burden’s 2004 study, he articulates the extent to which students’ learning experiences change or mold their attitudes concerning language immersion. Burden strives to answer how students’ attitudes influence language acquisition. He administered a questionnaire to get a more in-depth view of each classroom’s participants and their perception of the native speaking teacher of English’s (NSTE) role in a conversation class. This questionnaire captures and illustrates students’ attitude change during the fifteen-week semester, where “attitude is arguably a major component of motivation and favorable towards learning combined with effort to produce learning goals” (2004, p. 21). If learners have a positive attitude towards the classroom instructor’s teaching approach, they normally become more willing to attempt discussion and use practical communicative strategies to overcome language barriers. In contrast to Svanes’ (1988) belief that high achievers tend to develop positive attitudes as they proceed with learning, Burden’s work explores how to make classes more enjoyable for those who are not “high achievers”.

Burden notes that the results of his first questionnaire may reflect the teaching situation in high school where most of the students either learned English from a Japanese instructor or experienced team-teaching with a NSTE (2004). He articulates that their experience with a “traditional instructor-led approach” may have made them unsure of his classroom methodology. However, he believes that as the semester progressed, “the results indicated that students were more willing to take risks and were less inclined to use translation (2004, p. 33).”

The beliefs, attitudes, and motivation of Japanese university students are where language immersion falters due to misconceptions that are concrete and universal misconceptions in teaching methods. Paulo Freire (1996) points out concerns that educators’ teaching methods generally maintain and stimulate methods that mirror an oppressive society. For example, “the instructor talks and the students listen — meekly.” He also argues that teachers impose a totalitarian approach when, “the instructor chooses and enforces his choice, and the students comply,” and “the instructor chooses the program content, and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it” (p. 34).

Many NSTE have found the concept of the “instructor talks and the students listen” to be difficult to circumvent in Japanese classrooms. Traditionally, in Japanese society the instructor’s word is regarded
as absolute and the students do not question it, even if they know it is wrong. Aside from general classroom etiquette, Japanese students are reluctant to draw attention to themselves. As a classroom experiment, this researcher has at times made obvious mistakes on purpose, and then rewarded students who found and corrected the mistakes. This worked well, however motivating lower level students in my classes to find and correct the problems proved to be a much more difficult task when an immersive environment was strictly maintained. Most of the time, my students were afraid to make mistakes because “Japanese students have little or no experience in in-class interaction with the instructor, such as questioning or commenting or giving feedback” (Snell). In Western university classrooms, more closely following the Socratic method, this interaction with instructors is crucial. Furthermore, if no interaction or constructive dialogue exists between the instructor and students, it is assumed to be the instructor’s failure in their expected role. While patience and persistence can eventually overcome such deeply engrained cultural incongruence of student-instructor interaction, monolingual classroom language immersion method may increase the chances of a student giving up due to the fact that the student cannot and will not state that they do not understand the instructor.

As stated before, when instructors enforce their choice of TL acquisition, it is on prescriptive grounds and goes against many of the students’ preferred learning styles. Choosing an absolute TL immersion class forces students to adopt a learning style that they may be unfamiliar with and can cause them to fall behind due to a lack of TL proficiency. Situations can be found in some Japanese universities where a minority of students had technically failed to grasp the concept of English taught in junior highs and high schools and, in order to enter university, were allowed to decline taking an English placement test. With these students in consideration, in order to avoid prescriptive teaching methods instructors should offer students a choice whether or not they would like to use their L1 in class, in effect lowering the students’ anxiety levels and other affective barriers (Auerbach).

Overall, while it is easy for instructors to opine that language immersion is beneficial to students of all proficiencies, letting students choose how they want to acquire the TL may garner greater benefits. The most important choice would be permitting the students to use their L1 in class. Allowing students to choose their learning method can greatly improve the students’ attitudes and motivation, making them more successful learners.

Conclusion

In conclusion, regarding the debate surrounding the use of students’ L1 within the parameters of university level ESL/EFL classrooms, it would seem that a mono-linguistic immersion approach to teaching cannot truly be hailed as superior, but nor can it be asserted that bilingual NSTEs are a necessity to the second language acquisition process. It would seem that the most beneficial approach for educators is to constantly keep in mind that students are human beings of differing abilities,
motivations, and goals. In contrast, the folly of prescriptive teaching methods such as strict mono-
linguistic immersion seems to be that they by nature treat students like computers that will accept
programming as opposed to the individualistic human beings that they in fact are. Maximizing the
students’ exposure to the target language remains of the utmost priority for NSTE, but to remain
ignorant of the students’ L1 does disservice to both students and teacher, and furthermore limits
the depth of attainable knowledge and rich cross-culture experiences that could further inspire both
learner and educator. In light of this article’s findings, it is clear that more extensive research be done
to further benefit the future of English Studies and Linguistic Acquisition Methods.

References