The Use of L1 (Japanese) in the English Language
Classroom by L2 (English) Teachers

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This paper presents arguments for use of L1 (Japanese) for a variety of reasons including cross cultural communication as well as for pedagogical considerations such as “monitoring”. The importance of teacher L1 ability also applies to problems of classroom management as well as to the quality of relationships in the institution. This article argues for academic institutional support of foreign teacher L1 competence.

0. Current pedagogical thinking has firmly established the need and appropriacy for use of the target language (in this case English hereafter referred to as L2) by the language instructor in the classroom. Pedagogically, no distinction need be made between the native or non-native instructor, since the methodology will be effective in either case; the non-native English speaker (usually sharing L1, or in this case the Japanese language) being thought to have the advantage of being able to explain points of grammar and meaning in the students’ own native language. Generally, L2 native speakers are reserved for more advanced students perhaps largely because of the foreign teachers’ inability to communicate often even simple explanations or instructions in the students’ L1. In Japan, particularly, with the “bead game” situation (a reference to the particular nature and purpose of foreign language education,) so cogently described by Roy Andrews Miller in Japan’s Modern Myth (Miller 1982) foreign teachers have been essentially limited to a role of “language model”. Even given the limited scope or purpose of what is known as eikaiwa (English conversation) there are considerable arguments for attempting to alter the status quo, giving more responsible participation to the L2 native speaker. It will be shown how this will be of benefit to students in terms of language acquisition as well as in another extremely important dynamic, namely that of CULTURAL MODEL. One of the most undervalued uses of the native speaker is not using them to provide a functional representation of the human culture of the target language. Too often the perceived requirements of pedagogy create a situation where the teacher becomes limited to a function of LANGUAGE MACHINE; something (as opposed to someone) the purpose of which is to exercise the student in the language study task.

If the goals of university language instruction in Japan indeed go beyond academic learning in the sense described by Stephen D. Krashen in The Natural Approach, (Krashen 1983) then it may be argued that teachers, and here hopefully L2 native speakers, will be encouraged and, more importantly, supported in their efforts to convey something more of what the Living L2 is and

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something more about who speaks it. The important distinction between acquisition and learning may be summarized according to Krashen and Terrell in the following way:

Acquiring a language is ‘picking it up,’ i.e., developing ability in a language by using it in natural, communicative situations. Children acquire their first language...adults also can acquire: they do not usually do it quite as well as children, but it appears that language acquisition is the central, most important means for gaining linguistic skills even for an adult.

Language learning is different from acquisition. Language learning is ‘knowing the rules,’ having a conscious knowledge about grammar. According to recent research, it appears that formal language learning is not nearly as important in developing communicative ability in second languages as previously thought. Many researchers now believe that language acquisition is responsible for the ability to understand and speak second languages easily and well. Language learning may only be useful as an editor, ...

The obstacles to the implementation of this concept are particularly daunting in Japan and therefore warrant the use of particular strategies based upon a candid assessment of the history of foreign language instruction as well as of the current dynamics of INTERCULTURALIZATION and other developments, in Japan.

1. To briefly scrutinize salient points of pedagogy I shall first cite Krashen and Terrell in The Natural Approach where it is pointed out that maximum exposure to the target language will be of benefit to the student as long as there is communication. Most notably, for teaching the spoken language, even grammar correction and explanation may be, even should be, if possible, in L2 but, as any sort of teacher talk is best kept to a minimum, either L1 or L2 could be used.

It may be unnecessary to point out that the foreign teacher who is unable to use L1 is thereby restricted to using more highly structured activities, particularly drills and carefully controlled dialogues, thus limiting the students' opportunities to develop and explore the conversational experience. Japanese university students will almost universally assert their preference for non-structured opportunities to talk in English. This preference reflects directly on the pre-university years of English learning with the yakudoku (grammer translation) method which allows for no spontaneity and gives students little opportunity to make constructive mistakes in their conversational efforts.

In both verbal and written informal student surveys that I have conducted, students predo- minantly preferred that the L2 native be able, i.e. available, to explain the lexicon, grammatical points or classroom business such as homework assignments that were unclear in L2. I was also able to learn from such surveys that even though learning style preferences may vary from student to student, all would much prefer that the foreign teacher be able to assist in L1 at the students' discretion. That the students recognize this need is significant, but is not by any means the only argument to be weighed.
What more importantly comes into play is the factor of MONITORING (observation, checking and/or regulation). This is in fact a skill which the students must develop for themselves and be able to do by themselves. This self-monitoring then becomes the means by which they are able to develop comprehensive language and discourse skills. In a speaking context it thus becomes the domain of the teacher to act as monitor, consequently providing both a model for the student’s acquisition purposes and assistance in building self-monitoring skills. It is here that the teacher with little or no ability in the students’ L1 may encounter some problems.

The most readily apparent deficiency on the part of the teacher would then be the difficulty in assessing the source of error and presenting appropriate patterns for its correction. This of course is a problem which should be minimized by the competent teacher without the use of L1. What becomes of vastly greater importance then, is the true nature, the dynamic, of what is referred to as eikaiwa, or English conversation. Unlike the typical western language classroom, the foreign teacher in Japan soon finds that the students quickly establish what would appear to be a network, the purpose of which is to assist each other in any English language task; this is conducted, of course, predominantly in L1 and it is here that the true business of or need for monitoring takes place. In a more vernacular parlance, the skilled teacher must be able to run interference on the L1 network system or, essentially, lose control of much of the process in terms of classroom management as well as of the acquisition process itself.

More specifically, it is not unusual for students in Japan to discuss (in L1) at great length the variety of responses which may be given to the teacher’s question or any L2 exercise. As cited in “The Delayed Answer: Response Strategies of Japanese Students in Foreign Language Classes” by Rudolf Reinelt (Ehime University), individual student response time to a simple question may take several minutes as the students process each response as a group. This is also often true in a situation where a student can not “think” of a word or expression. Consulting a dictionary may turn out to be faster than the usual consultative process many, or most, students feel comfortable with. Not to fault the students whose language acquisition abilities have been greatly impinged on by the yakudoku method of teaching, the challenge is then to guide the students to develop a sense of conversation as it is understood by English speaking people. Generally speaking, students in Japan are taught too much vocabulary and taught too little about how or when to use this vocabulary. They know four different words for something but can say nothing because they don’t know how to select the word they want to use. Often it doesn’t matter for communication purposes which word they would use, but convincing them of this fact is a long process. More correctly one should perhaps say that it is a long process allowing them to experience communication.

Trying to determine a correct L2 response is not the only factor in this student L1 checking network. Another phenomenon very often observed involves translating a L2 word used by the teacher. Even when students understand the teacher, the network process takes place. A shortened and simplified example would be: T: “Do you wear glasses?” The student the question is directed to (S1) would then turn to another student (S2) and say “megane?”. Even if S2 indicates “Yes”, often S1 will still go on to check with S3 and S4. Perhaps S2 will check with S5 and so on until a nice
consensus has been reached about the meaning of glasses. This writer believes it is better to cut off this inefficient process by acknowledging the correctness of S1’s response in L1. Usually a nod is sufficient after the Teacher has established his/her own competence and checking (monitoring) ability. This can be done pleasantly and will hopefully guide students to their own more confident monitoring skills. One may argue that students will eventually develop confidence in any case. While this could be true, it is quite the teacher’s responsibility to ensure that this is an efficient a process as possible.

In other cases, this writer is aware that a great part of the L1 student discussion involves discarding so called wrong answers. Students typically will speak in L1 when they are at a loss for words, and frequently the assisting group around them proffers a variety of incorrect translations in English. The teacher should be either able to arrest this process or monitor it if it appears to be productive in the sense of class time spent, or if the students are truly building their own self-help, self-correction skills. It is far better for the teacher to play a mitigating role of dictionary than to diffidently allow the consultative process to run its course—or worse—to forbid students to attempt to express something which is a little difficult. The problem is not so much one of avoiding mistakes, it is rather one of rehabilitating the student from the destructive influence of rigid yakudoku methodology, to stop fearing errors, and learning to trust that they can as individuals actually talk to a foreign English speaker.

2. Before leaving the realm of the pedagogical, let me here add a number of salient points concerning the positive uses of L1 in the classroom. If it were sufficient for students to simply parrot structure exercises, read from texts or respond from memory these issues would have little significance. The exigencies of the Communicative Approach make it imperative, however, that much speaking activity take place in the classroom; moreover, students must be developing a strong sense of how to use the L2 to convey meaning. It is far too easy for the foreign teacher to proceed smoothly, happily encouraged by the students’ smiling and nodding, which may be construed as comprehension but may actually be simply a polite response to incomprehensible English. Unlike students in the American classroom, Japanese students nearly always choose not to “embarrass” the teacher by pointing out that they are unable to understand what is being said. That this is a problem in the English language classroom in incidental to the weight of cultural values at work.

Writing in “The Language Teacher”, Lu Lian De observes that students must be allowed to make the transition to the second/foreign language. Language (L1 and L2) similarities as well as differences can be instructive. In addition, she suggests the use of both L1 and L2 in tasks such as review and comprehension verification as well as for giving effective explanations. Students must believe that their teacher is able to accommodate the student level of proficiency, not the reverse.

3. Of considerably greater importance than pedagogical considerations concerning L1 use in the English language classroom are the imperatives of cultural sensitivity, of cross-cultural
communication and the dynamics that extend beyond the scope of language learning and even of language acquisition. To quote from an article on English Conversation in Japan by William Boletta of Senshu University, "A mere knowledge of structure or lexicon will not necessarily produce the requisite social behavior, thus making some sociolinguistic awareness an important essential of even the earliest training in effective oral communication. Communication—real-life interaction—always brings with it elements of the unexpected and the surprising, and good language training will prepare students for such eventualities."6

To consider the role of the foreign teacher beyond that of model or corrector, one may well ask what is it that the foreign teacher really can contribute to the language acquisition process? In some cases it may be desirable to acquaint students with better foreign language study habits. In most instances, a university teacher from a foreign country is the first encounter academic or otherwise, with a foreigner. In some more extreme cases it would not be unusual for students for whom this is true to be quite literally intimidated or frightened of the teacher/foreigner. They will typically, regardless of the duration or success of their high school English learning feel that it is impossible for them to speak to, to understand or be understood by a foreigner. Clearly, it is then well within the province of the foreigner so placed to help students establish and maintain the ability to function competently and confidently in English with the people who actually speak it.

It is not within the scope of this article to address why so many Japanese students feel this way about their first foreign teachers, but the phenomenon of "Gaijin fever" (extreme nervousness in the presence of a non-Japanese person) is well known to foreigners in Japan. One need not even pause to judge the cultural barriers to what may be referred to as "International Communication"; it is enough to say that the foreign teacher must first establish himself as a human being before he can begin to have any real effectiveness as a teacher. If students in the university elective classes are there with the intention of actually learning to speak English for the purpose of travel, business, or general ability, we may safely assume that they will have occasion to deal with people from abroad; they would do well then to be prepared for the sort of things an American, or given the nature of English as an International language, any other foreigner, might do.

The problem, or rather task at hand may be summarized as follows: a. to help the student realize that he has a real ability to speak in English, and b. to understand the person-ness of English speaking foreigners. If these points seem unwarranted to those lacking experience in Japan, an example from the classroom may be illuminating. A gaijin (usually a Caucasian) who can actually speak even a little Japanese may be often regarded as an amusing curiosity, surely not one to be taken seriously. Just as it is perceived that it is un-Japanese to speak English well, foreigners are considered to not be capable of speaking Japanese. The foreigner who attempts to speak Japanese beyond the level of fatuous, formulaic responses will be met with derision or more often with shocked, though politely controlled, contempt, the response to which is then to ignore the foreigner or if that is not possible, to ignore the fact that he spoke in Japanese. This may typically entail answering the foreigner in English, regardless of the accuracy of the English. This is most likely difficult to believe for those who have not experienced it directly. This same foreigner, when
writing, correctly, some Kanji on the blackboard creates immediate pandemonium among the students; they sometimes literally scream, laugh and turn to others to comment on the event and share the joke. This is not what may be interpreted as a sophisticated response.

In the real world the Japanese student is usually not at all prepared for the foreigner on the street who answers back in Japanese; the student feels defeated or very threatened. The responsible teacher will be able to bring the students successfully through this cultural transition. The students must discover that language is a dynamic of give and take. They very much need to experience being relaxed with a great variety of situations. This is not at all a matter of “Fechas, faldas and fanderingas” (or trivial, superficial aspects of culture,) to quote the anthropologist Sonia Eagle. Acquiring English involves not just being able to talk about Christmas or how to get the correct size garment when shopping at Waikiki. It is, very simply, essential for the student who wishes to develop a sensitivity to non-Japanese to re-create his own identity of self vs. the other. It would be presumptuous to attempt to here establish or suggest what the Japanese student should do thereafter, that of course is his own affair. It is, quite definitely, the province of the teacher to prepare the student for the encounter with the cultural values of others. The student will then do as he sees fit.

The many exigencies of the modern world do not permit us to further indulge students in pleasant diversions while they contemplate a comfortable future. The days of viewing other cultures and their “quaint” customs as a form of entertainment are long dead. According to an article by Ruth Wajnryb, the modern language teacher needs to be “culturally aware.” I shall here summarize more precisely what this entails, given appropriate adjustments for the differences between English taught as a foreign language OR as a second language. Wajnryb explains that there are three issues concerning the need to be culturally aware. They are first the necessity that the teacher recognize himself as “culture-bearer” which should lessen the likelihood of clashes; second, the teacher has “culture-specific expectations” which he must learn to suspend when they may place inappropriate demands on students; indeed, the teacher needs to be prepared for considerable disappointment in terms of the results and student styles that may have been reasonable to expect when teaching in one’s native country. On the plus side, the teacher must also be prepared for results and abilities that would not normally be found at home. The third issue concerns the cultural assumptions “Below the conscious level.” Neither the teacher nor the students will naturally be aware of the set of assumptions they have. This cultural “blind spot” is the source of many kinds of misunderstanding both inside and outside of the classroom.7

In the classroom it is additionally important for the foreign teacher to be aware of the superficial level of cultural values. While this may not specifically be in terms of language spoken, the teacher must have the knowledge to avoid offensive or self-degrading behavior. An example cited here is that of noseblowing which is perfectly acceptable in the U.S. in front of a class but is inappropriate in Japan.8 As one student of mine put it: “You should avoid doing it in a quiet place” where others are present. The foreign teacher must also be prepared to deal with “culture shock” most notably in second language situations but also the foreign language teacher can do much to
prepare a student before he goes abroad if the teacher himself is culturally aware. One certainly cannot expect the students to know on what level their own cultural sensitivities may be impinged, or in what respect they must be ready to be more flexible or simply tolerant.

4. Another related issue that begs for recognition concerns quite simply the practicalities of everyday transactions. It is the strong opinion of this writer that a teacher instructing students with the same L1 cannot begin to imagine the problems of classroom management, extending to problems such as counseling, absence, cheating etc. that must be dealt with almost always in the students' L1. It is a remarkable phenomenon to witness the student who is quite fluent in a class discussion suddenly seem to lose all speaking ability when faced with his cheating. Dealing with these problems is no less of a competent teacher's responsibility for the fact that the L1 may be difficult or inconvenient to learn. It is not only the problem of dealing directly with the students that must be recognized; having to depend on colleagues to assist with classroom management or administrative affairs may actually be humiliating rather than merely troublesome. Ultimately, any experienced language student, or language teacher, will be well aware of the dynamic whereby an adult, when faced with a deficit of language ability, is in essence reduced to the unappealing status of child: to be cared for or assisted at the whim and at the discretion of the person in the position to provide assistance in translation or in any other activity. While local native colleagues may be only too happy to extend warm assistance to a teacher who needs help with the local language, the teacher who is language dependent loses much in terms of control and self esteem while building up, in addition, an unredeemable debt.

While it is hoped that the teacher who speaks the students' L1 will accrue some esteem in the eyes of the students, as is often the case, L1 competence is viewed as an extremely effective and valuable skill in Taiwan by a teacher who maintains that even a basic ability in L1 makes it possible for the teacher and students to develop a warm and friendly relationship-regardless of the ability of the students. Teacher L1 ability is a vehicle for establishing personal trust and sharing activities outside the classroom or formal acquisition context. Students and even their parents in many cultures may feel that a foreign teacher doesn't care about them or like them if the foreign teacher can't speak their L1. The positive dimensions of L1 ability on the foreign teacher's part are considerable. There are other reasons which, though less pleasant, are none the less compelling. It would be quite fatuous to maintain that all foreign language classrooms are showcases of mutual cultural/personal adoration. Relationships of enmity are certainly not unknown as the historical, racial, class, religious or economic values and prejudices along with the other cultural baggage bear directly and often uncompromisingly on the nature of the relationships between teacher and students as well as on the nature of the relationships between the individual students themselves. The foreign teacher unable to use L1 becomes quickly helpless in the face of conflicts between students by not being able to understand the nature or background of the problem. Even more acutely, at times the foreign teacher himself may be the object of abuse engendered by racial, sexist or other kind of prejudice. The teacher with L1 ability has a reasonable chance of apprehending
the augmentation of such problems ("monitoring") and of then being in a strong position of using the example of offense or prejudice to instruct the class in intercultural sensitivity or, in other cases, of simple adult courtesy. It is not possible or necessary to here cite examples of the above; it may be sufficient to assert that the Japanese classroom, no less than those in the U.S. or any other country known to this writer, is not exceptional. The student who will permit himself racial verbal abuse or other rudeness because of the teacher’s ignorance of L1 is a student who has much to learn before he or she is ready to “communicate.”

5. Any foreign teacher employed at any level of education in the U.S. would almost certainly be expected to know the students L1. While it is understandable that some countries, such as Japan, are not able to secure foreign teachers already fluent in Japanese in sufficient numbers, the bare fact that foreigners aren’t required to learn or are not supported in their efforts to learn is in itself a strong statement about the true position of foreign teachers in Japan. The fact is that teachers who have no ability in L1 are considered to be only temporary; unfortunately, even many teachers with L1 fluency are still not considered permanent. They are, in the same way, excluded from the workings of the academic institution both in terms of not being able to make any real contributions or not being able to discern the true behind-the-scenes picture and are thus at a great functional and personal disadvantage. More importantly, they are not able to assert themselves at those times when they have been treated unfairly or discriminated against. The responsibility for this problem goes both ways: the institution may prefer to escape its responsibility by hiding behind a linguistic *sudare* (a bamboo blind or shade) or by excluding the teacher from the consensus process thereby discarding the critical and consultative functional relationship. On the other hand, the teacher, as well, by not knowing L1, may be inclined to eschew participation in matters of academic and personal importance. The “It’s not my problem” attitude does all parties concerned a disservice.

6. Foreign language teachers must realize how difficult it is to acquire a language but cannot, in light of the great number of reasons enumerated above, lightly absolve themselves from competence in the L1. As has been shown, these reasons range from the pedagogical to the issue of cultural sensitivity as well as to the merely practical. But in no respect can the foreign teacher escape the need for being able to use the L1. What then, beyond the obvious need to acquire L1 may be concluded from these above observations? With specific reference to Japan, but with all countries in mind, some of the responsibility for the success or failure of the teacher in L1 is that of the educational institution employing the teacher. Too much lip service is paid to the veneer of internationalization; something more substantial in terms of direct support for active L1 learning is clearly necessary. The institution must take an active role in the process of the foreign teacher’s L1 acquisition. Not to do so tacitly, but clearly allows manipulation, exploitation, and inefficiency.

Whether the issue then is perceived to be primarily pedagogical or more that of intercultural dynamics, the significance of the teacher’s L1 ability is unavoidable. All schools and faculty members will be measured against these criteria regardless of whether they are approved of or
disapproved of by the institution or by individuals. What is hoped is that for those who are concerned there is a clear agenda with which to respond.

In a broader context, the above issues apply not only to matters pertaining to L2 acquisition but also to most all professions and activities of a cross-cultural nature. It is hoped that consideration of these ideas will give those concerned more value or satisfaction for the time and money invested in the whole cultural environment. There may be very little that the foreign teacher can do to alter the Japanese attitude about Japanese who speak foreign languages. Although it really is time to discard the current Japanese belief that Japanese people are "poor at foreign languages" and become engaged in a process of constructive activity.

Communication, specifically language learning in this case, must be a two way street in all respects. Those participating on every level have distinct responsibilities and numerous options. Cultivating real support will allow for greater mutual respect and understanding. Not to do so, unwittingly or not, creates an adversarial situation which can only get worse as more and more people become involved in the problem.

FOOTNOTES

5. Lu Lian De, "Use of the Mother Tongue in the Secondary School Classroom" *The Language Teacher*, Japan Association of Language Teachers XII, No. 7, p. 29.
8. Wajnryb, p. 18.

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