

# A Common Foreign Language Classroom Dilemma: When to Use L1 or L2?

## A Retrospective Look at Two Specific Skill Classes

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This report examines questions specific to the pursuit of a foreign language within an oral communication class and an English composition class. These questions concern the instructor's use of the students' native language or L1 (Japanese), the language the students are studying or L2 (English) and students' opinions related to language usage. Insight and potential answers pursuant to these questions are examined by way of student feedback from both classes.

*Keywords: L1 and L2 use, English communication, English composition*

### Introduction

The questions addressed in this report are:

1. What role does the L1 have in a foreign language classroom? There are researchers and practitioners that hold the opinion that L1 use can be beneficial for students (Cook, 2001; Tang, 2002).
2. What are the implications of an L2 exclusive policy? In recent years, a number of government entities, such as educational ministries and school boards have been advocating L2-in-L2, e.g., English-in-English foreign language classrooms. This report examines the possible ramifications of such directives.
3. What thoughts or opinions do students appear to have in relation to the instructor's use of L1 and L2 in the classroom?

Before proceeding further, clarification regarding instructor L1 (Japanese) use is necessary. L1 use by the instructor depends on the instructor's L1 ability and her or his level of comfort concerning its use in the classroom. L1 use by an instructor can have both positive and negative effects in the classroom. Positive effects include, showing the students that the instructor is a language learner too, demonstrating through

her or his own errors that L2 mistakes are normal, and lessening potential feelings of anxiety or fear of not being understood students may have. Negative effects include, causing confusion due to inaccurate usage, the instructor using class to showcase her or his foreign language ability, and using L1 (Japanese) when L2 (English) use is more beneficial and appropriate.

This report begins with a literature review that outlines the various positions that have been put forth regarding L1 and L2 usage in the foreign language classroom. Then student comments from each class (oral communication and English composition) are presented. This report concludes with a summation and comments on possible future action and research.

### 1. Literature Review

There is a sizeable amount of research that pertains to L1 and L2 usage in the foreign language classroom (Schweers, 1999; Nation, 2001; Ford, 2009). Although there are a variety of opinions and assertions, common viewpoints are present. Stances on L1 and L2 usage in foreign language classrooms typically fall into the following categories.

- i. **L1 Predominant:** The L1 should be favored when

it comes to rule-based, e.g., grammar, or procedural instructions in the classroom. The grammar-translation method is an example of a predominantly L1 approach to language learning.

ii. **L2 Exclusive:** The L2 is the only language that is permissible. The L1 should be vehemently avoided at all costs. The rationale for this approach is simple and straightforward. The best way to learn a language is to use it exclusively.

iii. **L1 and L2 Mixed:** Foreign language classrooms should include a mixture of L1 and L2. Advocates of mixed usage generally agree that the topic or task should dictate L1 or L2 usage. For example, explaining how to play a board game is done in L1 whereas actually playing the board game is done in L2.

## 1.2. L1 Predominant

In the 70's and 80's, methods such as the grammar-translation method and the audio-lingual method were standard in most foreign language classrooms. These methods relied heavily on L1 use for instruction and were based mainly on direct translation, repetition, and pattern drills. Then in the 90's there was an enormous shift away from these methods. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) became the prevailing method. The L2 was now supposed to be taught in the L2. All of a sudden L1 use was viewed as interference. However, and Japan was certainly not alone, with the push by governments to have educational institutions adopt CLT as the new norm, little effort was made to provide adequate training for all of the teachers who had been educated and trained using previous methods. Teachers were left wondering how to teach (Sato & Kleinsasser, 2004). Many teachers simply reverted to what they knew which were the grammar-translation method and the audio-lingual method by way of native speaking foreign ALTs (Assistant Lan-

guage Teachers) replacing tape recorders. Officially and professionally L1 predominant methods were derided and subsequently mandated to cease in favor of communicative based methods such as CLT.

This was a classic case of throwing the baby out with the bath water. A method does not work or falls out of favor so get rid of it in totality. Thankfully, many professionals and practitioners are reassessing the benefits and use of traditionally L1 predominant methods such as explicit grammar teaching Focus on Form (FonF) (Cook, 2001). Does this mean that L1 predominant classrooms should be reconsidered? Absolutely not, it just means that there is a place for certain areas of language study that tend benefit from L1 use. One such area is explicit grammar explanation.

## 1.3. L2 Exclusive

Proponents of an L2 exclusive classroom argue that input is primary (Krashen, 1988). The logic behind an L2 only approach is largely premised upon how native speakers learn their L1. As infants, we receive input from those around us and when the time is right, we start to produce output. It was this logic that led to second language immersion programs. Students in such programs spend the majority of their class time 'immersed' in the L2, with their native or L1 being taught as a separate single subject. However, for the majority of foreign language environments an immersion approach is not practical for several reasons.

Program cost and overall need are two key reasons why immersion programs are often incompatible within the foreign language environment. Take Japan for example, immersion programs are possible, but not on a large scale. Firstly, there are not enough qualified teachers to teach all the required subjects in English. The cost to bring in qualified foreign teachers is prohibitive as is the cost of training Japanese teachers. In

terms of overall need, for a large-scale immersion program to be successful, there must be an overwhelming social or economic need for the L2. This is not the case in Japan.

For Japan, a more realistic pathway is an increase in L2 class time and that the L2 be the primary language of instruction. Pathways such as this are not without detractors. Opponents argue that increased L2 education comes at the expense of L1. This belief is falsely predicated on the argument that the use of one language detracts from the development of the other. Another belief related to this position is that, particularly in the case of English, the L2 represents *linguistic imperialism* (Phillipson, 2008). Neither of these arguments is credible as they pertain to Japan. Japan is a country with a deep history and a definite sense of cultural identity. The Japanese language is equally robust and is in no way threatened by English or any other foreign language. So, putting such beliefs aside, what direction is L2 (English) education taking in Japan?

In Japan, for the most part, English is the most widely taught foreign language. It is taught anywhere from 1 to 4 times a week depending on the grade level. In 2010, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) introduced a dictum that beginning in 2013 high school English classes should be conducted primarily in English (MEXT, 2010). Policies like this will not have any meaningful effect if they are merely dictated in a top down format. It is inherent that teachers be prepared for such initiatives with adequate training. Failing to do so will result in little to no change at the classroom level.

In my experience, an L2 in L2 approach is most feasible when (a) The approach is done right from the start without any exceptions or (b) The practice is

done with a small number of students so as to allow constant monitoring and individual attention. Additionally, I believe it helps students to let them know that they may seek assistance in L1 outside the L2 exclusive classroom. When students do not feel that they are able to express themselves adequately in their L2, feelings of anxiety, frustration, and consequently a loss of motivation often follow. For these reasons, I feel that an L2 exclusive classroom is difficult to maintain and it puts unrealistic expectations on students, especially lower level students. Indeed student feedback I have received supports this notion. I will expound upon this feedback later in this report.

#### 1.4. L1 and L2 Mixed

A mixture of L1 and L2 in the classroom also has its proponents. Students receive L2 input and produce L2 output via the activities and practice built in to a particular course. L1 is often used to explain how an activity is to be undertaken. It is frequently used to explain difficult content, such as a grammar point or to explain a phrase or concept that does not have a similar semantic or cultural reference point in the students' native language (L1). The biggest hurdle to overcome with any blended or mixed-use approach is determining the right amount or balance? It is my assertion that specifics are not possible. There are too many uncontrollable variables, e.g., class size, student ability, course schedule, etc., involved in a foreign language classroom to make any sweeping all-encompassing declarations. There are factors that instructors can consider to help develop points of best practice.

Cook (2001) outlines several "ways of using the L1 positively in teaching" (p.413). Among the list are four distinct factors. The first is *efficiency*. In Japan, a typical university foreign language class is ninety minutes and normally only occurs once a week, so if L1 can be used for the sake of brevity, Cook argues it

should be. If the time taken to explain an activity in L2 is longer than the activity itself, then it only makes sense to take advantage of efficient L1 use. This assertion comes with a caveat. If the instructions can be explained in comprehensible L2 without consuming an inordinate amount of time, then the instructions should definitely be given in L2.

The second factor is *learning*. If L1 use can aid in the students learning what they are practicing in L2, then L1 use is beneficial. I can attest to where L1 use was not beneficial and clearly did not aid learning. Personally, I witnessed many classes early in my teaching career when all the students did was listen and repeat. Students were given instruction in L1, but they were not provided any context. This left many of the students void of any schema related information that would have potentially made their language learning ability more robust. In class, when prompted with a trigger phrase or question, the students would produce one desired response.

Q: How are you?

A: I'm fine thank you, and you?

If there were any alterations in the trigger phrase or question the majority of students would be at a loss for what to say next.

Q: How's it going?

A: ..... I'm ...???

The students learned to listen for a specific prompt and then say the one corresponding response, but they did not *learn* what they were hearing or saying. They were parroting based on the prompts they were given. There was little to no meaning connected, it was just canned memorization.

The third factor is *naturalness*. Cook points out that

quite often students feel more comfortable expressing certain, “functions or topics in the first language rather than the second” (Cook 2001, p.413). In many languages and cultures, there are often contexts or expressions that are not readily translatable. Before every meal, Japanese people commonly say *itadakimasu*. The literal meaning of *itadakimasu* is to receive, but in the context of eating the meaning is similar to saying, “I receive this meal with gratitude.” The English language does not have a singular direct translation for this saying. English speakers would tend to convey the sentiment of *itadakimasu* with either a thank you to the person who prepared the meal by saying something like, “It looks delicious, thank you for cooking dinner.” Or they may engage in a religious prayer, depending on what, if any, religious faith they follow. This example illustrates how language learners tend to shift or code-switch to their L1 when a naturally equivalent L2 example is not available.

The fourth factor is *external relevance*. Does the use of L1 lend itself to the improvement of L2 usage in a way that is relevant in the world outside the classroom? A classroom example might be an instructor explaining in Japanese that in specific instances vocabulary usage among American speakers of English (A.E.) and British speakers of English (B.E.) can occur, e.g., A.E. “I’m beat.” vs. B.E. “I’m knackered.” External relevance is arguably the most difficult factor to judge in reference to the Japanese foreign language environment. Quite simply in many parts of Japan chances of encountering an English speaker, while certainly on the rise, remain sparse. This is why I tend to focus on the first three factors. I tend to use the L1 for efficiency. My most common instances of L1 usage for efficiency are:

a. Giving abstract instructions or explanations, for example, explaining the difference between a re-statement and a summary concluding sentence in a

paragraph

- b. Asking students in L1 (Japanese) – “How would you say this in English?”
- c. Classroom management – in large classes students just seem to respond more quickly to an L1 command

In terms of learning, I tend to limit my L1 use as it is my L2 and I do not want to confuse students further. I use Japanese when I am confident that the information I am conveying will help deepen my students' understanding of the material. For example, I may use Japanese to explain why English speakers substitute the verb 'play', e.g., “I played with my friends yesterday” with the phrasal verb 'hang out', e.g., “I hung out with my friends yesterday” as we get older.

As for naturalness, again, I tend to limit my use of L1. I will switch between English and Japanese if I feel it illustrates a clear point between the two languages as in the example of *itadakimasu* and how it is expressed in English.

### 1.5. Student L1 Use

With respect to student use of L1, I find the best way to encourage L2 use is to not explicitly discourage L1 use. However, if I feel that the students are capable of expressing themselves in L2, then I positively encourage them to do so. Student L1 use should be primarily for the purpose of clarification among peers or with the instructor when applicable.

Having reviewed various dynamics of L1 and L2 classroom usage, I now proceed to a discussion based upon feedback forms received from two different classes, oral communication and English composition.

## 2. The Student Feedback Form

The feedback forms are given to students in between the seventh and eighth week of a 15-week course. The forms are anonymous, only the name of the course appears on the form. The form is in Japanese and there are two parts.<sup>1</sup>

Part 1: この授業を受けて良いと思う点を具体的に記述してください。

Please provide in detail what you think is good about this course.

Part 2: この授業に関して希望する点があれば、具体的に記述してください。

Please provide in detail the hopes you have, if any, concerning this course.

In my classes I give three basic instructions both in English and in Japanese after the forms have been handed out. First, I tell my students that they may write in either language or both, whatever combination they wish. Second, I ask that if they write in Japanese to please write neatly as Japanese is my second language. Third, I reiterate that the main point of the form is to write in detail. I explain that a comment, either positive or critical, written without a clear reason will not likely yield any distinct change in the classroom.

## 3. Oral Communication Class

As the subject name implies, this is a speaking focused class. It is an introductory first-year course. This class had 55 students (53 feedback responses). This course is an elective for all students except those students who are considering becoming an English major. The textbook for this course is divided among common themes, e.g., talking about likes and dislikes, describing one's job, and talking about the future. Each unit is comprised of two parts, listening and

speaking. The listening part covers topics like weak vowels, sentence stress, and casual English contractions such as 'gonna'. The speaking part covers topics such as using examples for clarification, paraphrasing, and asking for repetition.

### 3.1. Oral Communication Class – L1 and L2 Usage

In this class I try in earnest to adhere to an L2 exclusive classroom. Yet, I must admit that due to certain factors, i.e., class size and time constraints, I do find myself using L1 in class. I use it to save time when giving instructions. Some of the activities involve multiple group changes. I once made the attempt to diagram the group changes on the blackboard, but was met by a number of quizzical looks from more than a few students. I also use Japanese if I need to bring the class to order quickly. This is not to say the class is unruly, just that as a whole the class appears to quiet down more quickly when they hear a Japanese imperative. It is with these exceptions that I use Japanese. The rest of the time I use L2 (English), even when responding to a student who addresses me using L1 (Japanese). In an effort to keep L2 usage among students at an optimal level, I try to have as many opportunities for them to communicate with each other. We begin each class with a topical Q&A. For example, in the fall, when temperatures begin to drop – What are some of your favorite cold weather foods? Or, What do you do to keep warm? This type of quick and easy start to the lesson puts the students in an L2 frame of mind.

### 3.2. Oral Communication Class – Student Feedback

The student feedback for this class was largely concerned, as one may have assumed, with English communication. A general analysis of the feedback

revealed some commonalities. Language choice, 24 students (45%) responded entirely in English. Some of the comments<sup>2</sup> were:

S1: Part 1: It's a good way to have a time to speak English because we don't usually use English in our daily life.

Part 2: I wish I could have much time for conversation.

S2: Part 1: I like OC Ia. Because group work is interesting for me. In addition, we can learn basic of English. Teacher is interesting.

Part 2: Please make some prints about each Unit. I want to use them to study myself.

18 students (34%) responded entirely in Japanese. Some of the comments<sup>3</sup> were:

S3: Part 1: 実際に話すことが出来ていいと思う。なぜなら、話し方のくせや正しい発音の仕方がわかるからだ。

I think it's good that we can have real conversations because we can understand how to speak and say words correctly.

Part 2: 特になし  
Nothing in particular

S4: Part 1: 英語を話すことの楽しさ。英語でのコミュニケーションを学ぶことで知らない外国人と話すときでも応用して使うことができる。

It is fun speaking English. Learning to communicate in English so we can even use English with foreign people that we do not know.

Part 2: 英語の名曲を教えて欲しい一歌を歌

う時間等

I would like to sing English songs, etc.

Six students (11%) commented in both Japanese and English. Lastly, five students (9%) wrote comments specifically concerning L1 and L2 use.

S5: Part 1: 難しい英語がわからなかった時に日本語で話してくれたのでとてもよい。遊ぶ時間があって講義をうけやすい。

When the English is difficult, the teacher speaks in Japanese, that's good. Because we have time for activities, this class is easy to take.

Part 2: 今までの講義で十分満足。

So far, I am completely satisfied with this class.

S6: Part 1: ネイティブな発音を聞ける。

I can listen to a native speaker's pronunciation.

Part 2: 自分は英語が苦手なので、全部英語で説明されると意味が理解できない。大事な事などは日本語をまぜて言ってほしい。

I am not very good at English. When everything is explained in English, I cannot understand. When it is something important, I would like some Japanese explanation.

These comments echo similar findings in (Carson & Kashihara, 2012) where language learners at a beginner level reported a need for L1 support.

#### 4. English Composition Class

This class had 20 students (17 respondents). This class is for second-year students who would either like to major in English or have an interest in English writing. The overall goal of this class is to become more

proficient in writing paragraphs. Over the length of the course, students are guided through the main parts of a paragraph, e.g., topic sentence, supporting sentences, and the concluding sentence. The course then moves on to specific types of paragraphs, e.g., descriptive, narrative, and expository. Students were also required to submit weekly online assignments to monitor their progress.

##### 4.1. English Composition Class – L1 and L2 Usage

While I believe maximum use of the students' L2 is most beneficial in classes like oral communication, I sometimes have doubts when it comes to instruction that specifically focuses on writing. If I were unable to communicate in the students' first language, then this whole point becomes moot. Some may argue that it would be better for students to only have L2 during any foreign language class. I would agree in most cases, but not this one. For me, the fact is my students know that I can communicate in Japanese. For a number of students in this particular class they have an expectation for me to use Japanese. This course covers some grammar that is above what they have encountered in their general English classes. So, in an effort to make it easier for my students I use more Japanese in this class than others. This choice does not come without reservations. First, Japanese is my second language and like my students I am afraid of making a mistake. I have an added pressure because any mistake I make will likely cause my students to become more confused. Second, any instance when I use Japanese is an instance when I am not using English. This potentially deprives some of the more advanced students the chance to have more comprehensible input in class. My solution is an English or L2 first policy. I explain the material, grammar point, etc., in English first and then I check to see if the students have understood. I do this by either checking

their classwork or by asking students to explain, in either English or Japanese, what it is they think they are supposed to do. If there appears to be a miscommunication, I will try to bridge the gap using Japanese.

#### 4.2. English Composition Class – Student Feedback

Again, owing to the construct of the feedback form, the comments were largely positive. A number of students wrote how they felt that the amount of writing in the course was really helping them to “deepen” their understanding of English.

In this class, only three students (17%) used English. Admittedly, I was somewhat surprised by the low number of students who chose to write in English, given this was a writing class.

S1: Part 1 – I think this class is very good. Because it's easy to ask some questions, so I like it.

Part 2 – Please use easier words. Sometimes I can't understand what are you saying.

S2: Part 1 – I can learn the way of English essay's structure.

Part 2 – Nothing

12 (70%) students responded in Japanese.

S3: Part 1 – 英作文をたくさん書くことで、英語への理解が深まる点。

I write a lot of compositions and that deepens my understanding of English, which is good.

Part 2 – もう少し簡単な英語で分かりやすく

説明してほしいです。

I would like it if you could explain things in a little bit simpler English.

S4: Part 1 – 教科書の内容のレベルちょうどよいので英語力が向上する。

The level of the textbook is just right, so my English proficiency is improving.

Part 2 – 提出した英作文の訂正をしてほしい。

I would like you to correct the writing we submit.

\*Author's note: The writing was marked, but not corrected. The students were instructed to try correcting the writing themselves first.

Only two students (11%) chose to respond in both Japanese and English. Finally, two students (11%) made specific responses concerning L1 and L2 use in the classroom.

S5: Part 1 – 英語で授業をすすめていて、生徒がわからない反応をした場合に日本語で説明してくれる点が良いと思います。なぜなら、英語を聞きとる集中力とリスニングの力がつくからです。

When the class proceeds in English and students do not understand, I think it is a good idea to explain things in Japanese. I think it helps our ability to pay attention and listen to English.

Part 2 – このままで良いです。

The class is fine as is.

S6: Part 1 – 教科書を元の一つずつ丁寧に進めてくれる所が良い点であると思う。

I think it is good that the points in the textbook are clearly explained, one-by-one.



Part 2 – 英語で発言した後、その後できれば良いので日本語で言って欲しいです。

After saying something in English, I would like you to say it again in Japanese, if possible.

## 5. Inter-class Analysis

Between the two classes, one significant difference stands out. The number of students in the Oral Communication class that choose to respond entirely in English (24), nearly half of the students, was much greater than those in the English Composition class (3), under twenty percent of respondents. Why was that? One possibility is that being a first-year class and being in the first semester, many students may have felt that responding in English was more natural. Conversely, the majority of second-year students in the English Composition class may have become accustomed to responding to all of their feedback surveys in Japanese. Additional analysis of future feedback from other English classes is necessary to see if this or any other pattern bears out. However, for comments concerning L1 and L2 usage, the percentage of respondents was similar. Oral Communication had 5 respondents at 9% of the class and English Composition had 2 respondents at 11% of the class that commented specifically on language use. This is noteworthy given that these comments were provided indirectly, meaning that students were not asked to comment specifically on the use of L1 or L2 in class. These indirect comments demonstrate the need for further direct examination with regards to student attitudes and opinions toward L1 and L2 usage in class.

## 6. Conclusion

What is the take away from previous research, my own experiences, and my students' feedback concern-

ing L1 and L2 use in the classroom? First and foremost, use L2 as much as possible, but the language used needs to be comprehensible. It is important to always try and view the class material from the point of view of the student. It is vital for an instructor to ask, "Is there an easier way to present this material?" Or, when applicable, "How would I go about saying this in the students' L1?" After answering those questions, then it is time to make the decision as to whether to proceed in L1 or L2. In my opinion, there is no exact ratio for L1 and L2 usage. Instructors should consider Cook's factors efficiency, learning, naturalness, and external relevance when considering L1 and L2 use in the foreign language classroom. Students in both classes indicated a desire for both L1 and L2 use. Specifically, comments from both classes reflected a desire for L1 in terms of providing more explanation in class. More research is needed to examine what learner expectations are regarding the instructor's L1 and L2 usage in the foreign language classroom. It may prove more beneficial to have a sense of what learners are anticipating prior to enrollment in a class or course. Up until now, the majority of the research and reports have examined student comments post class, not prior to class.

1 The author translated the form

2 The comments are unedited

3 The Japanese comments are unedited and the author translated the comments

## 要約

本稿では、外国語科目であるオーラルコミュニケーションと英作文の授業において、教師が教室で使用する言語について論じた。その際、学生の母語である第一言語（日本語）および学生が学習中の第二言語（英語）を教師がどのように使用するのか、また、その教師の言語使用を学習者がどのように感じるのかについて、それぞれの授業で収集した受講者フィードバック

に基づいて検討した。

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