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The Use of Students' First Language in EFL Learning in Japan

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The use of students' first language (L1) to learn their second language has been a controversial issue in ELT (English Language Teaching) literature and academic discussions. The following article investigates published research that was carried out on the use of L1 for teaching and learning English language within the last 35 years until 2018, mainly focusing on EFL (English as a foreign language) learning in Japan. The paper concludes that English should be clearly prioritised as the main language used in the EFL classroom, and also that students' L1 is a rich resource and linguistic foundation which should be used for learning English.

Introduction

The belief by academics that English is best taught and learned without using a student's own language has been widespread and dominant for most of the 20th century, and this belief has perpetuated the unchallenged advance of monolingual, English-only teaching and learning (Hall and Cook, 2013, p.7). However, in the 21st century there is increasing worldwide support for the use of a student's L1 in EFL learning, which defies a ban on its use that has existed for at least 100 years. Though warning against overuse of the L1 in class, a growing number of researchers point out the advantages of using the L1 as a valuable resource in learning the L2 (second language).

Following an explanation of the so-called monolingual assumption and challenges to it, this paper surveys some of the main criticisms of English-only teaching, then reviews research into teachers' and students' attitudes towards L1 use, followed by examples from research on the effective uses of L1 in classrooms, and concludes with arguments that support the use of bilingual dictionaries and targeted L1 usage. Note that the term 'L1' (first language), as used throughout this paper, is equivalent in meaning to 'own language', 'native language' or 'mother tongue'.

The Monolingual Assumption

The monolingual assumption that English-only teaching is the best method for achieving bilingual outcomes is, according to Widdowson (2003), a legacy of the so-called Direct Method from the late nineteenth century, which deliberately avoided the students' L1. It was based on now-discredited behaviourist ideas about language learning and ignored the presence of the L1 in the learning process of acquiring the L2 (Widdowson, 2003, p. 152).

The Direct Method was used where the English language was talked and taught instead of being explained in the students' L1, and also for training of native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) who, for example, had to teach in countries before they were proficient in the language of their students (Harmer, 2001, p. 131). Yu (2000), explains that the Direct Method “imitated the way that children learn their first language, emphasizing the avoidance of translation and the direct use of the foreign language as the medium of instruction in all situations.” Thus, the monolingual method prioritized the development of listening and speaking skills rather than reading and writing ability (Yu, 2000, p. 176).

Challenging the Monolingual Assumption

Until recent decades, most researchers and educators believed the monolingual assumption that students learn best when their L1 is banished from the classroom. However, the monolingual assumption has been increasingly challenged by research into teaching that relates the language being taught to the students' L1. For example, Ellis (1994) argues “... there is now clear evidence that the L1 acts as a major influence in L2 acquisition. One clear advance in transfer research has been the reconceptualization of the influence of the L1, ... [where] in cognitive accounts it is viewed as a resource which the learner actively draws on in interlanguage development” (p. 343). This is supported by Butzkamm & Caldwell (2009) who believe that the L1 is ‘the greatest pedagogical resource’ of a foreign language learner because ‘it lays the foundations for all other languages we might want to learn’, and this requires that L2 teachers exploit the learners' L1 in a systematic and appropriate way (p. 13).

Therefore, instead of being seen negatively as an impediment to learning, a student's L1 should be viewed positively as a resource to use in L2 acquisition (Widdowson, 2003, p. 152). Moreover, according to Cook (2001), learners should feel encouraged “to see the first language as something that is part of themselves whatever they do and appreciate that their first language is inextricably bound up with their knowledge and use of the second language” (Cook, 2001).

Cummins (2007) directly challenges the monolingual, English-only method with three theoretical perspectives on how students actually learn. The first perspective is from cognitive psychology research and emphasises the importance of building on students' prior knowledge to stimulate the best possible learning. He argues that "The role of prior knowledge is particularly relevant ... because if prior knowledge is encoded in students' L1, then the engagement of prior knowledge is inevitably mediated through L1" (pp. 231-232).

The second theoretical perspective stresses "the interdependence of literacy-related skills and knowledge across languages and the fact that cross-lingual transfer is occurring as a normal process of bilingual development." This means that the development of a skill in one language supports the development of the same skill in the other language(s) because of interdependence across languages, which enables "the transfer of cognitive/academic or literacy-related proficiency from one language to another." The third theoretical perspective advocates a "dynamic systems view of multilingualism" and introduces the concept of "multi-competences" to stress "the fact that L2 users have different mental structures from monolinguals." (Cummins, 2007, pp. 231-232).

Teacher Views of L1 Usage

McMillan, Rivers and Cripps (2009) collected responses from NESTs (native English-speaking teachers) at a Japanese university about their perceptions of L1 use in EFL classes. Results showed 58% of teachers had a partially positive to positive view of L1 use by the teacher, and a larger majority (72%) of teachers had a partially positive to positive view toward the students using their L1 in the classroom. The researchers conclude that "... depending on student proficiency levels and the complexity of lesson content, ... strategies may well include small amounts of L1 use in some stage of the lesson, while some lessons, or parts thereof, may be conducted entirely in the TL [target language]" (McMillan, Rivers and Cripps, 2009).

In a related study that built on their previous research, McMillan and Rivers (2011) collected and examined the opinions of 29 NESTs and non-NESTs at a Japanese university. They found that most teachers in both groups had a generally positive attitude toward the L1 and believed that it might improve learning. This generally supportive attitude toward the L1 contradicted the English-only policy at the university. The many reasons given to support L1 usage included to enable successful communication, assist understanding, develop empathy and show appreciation of the learners' linguistic and cultural identity. Overall, teachers expressed opposition to prohibiting the learners' L1, saying that is "... against the grain of bilingual education and the

promotion of multilingualism” (McMillan and Rivers, 2011, p. 255).

Hall and Cook (2013) conducted a worldwide questionnaire survey of attitudes and beliefs towards L1 use by ELT (English language teaching) instructors in elementary, secondary, and tertiary schools of more than 111 countries. A total of 2,785 respondents, including 50 EFL teachers in Japan, provided strong evidence of widespread L1 use within ELT classes, thus “confirming the validity of own-language [L1] use.” Regarding experienced EFL teachers’ use of the students’ L1 in class, a university teacher in Japan said her views changed over time, explaining that “...at the beginning I was like very pious, maintaining the English only policy. But then I thought, wait a second, it’s not working. It doesn’t work.” A second experienced university teacher in Japan believed that a student’s momentary need to use the L1 was a decisive factor, explaining, “It depends on the moment. I am a kind of face reader.” Overall, results of the questionnaire survey showed that L1 use is widely used in ELT classrooms (Hall and Cook, 2013).

Student Views of L1 Usage

Burden (2000) analysed Japanese student views about student and teacher L1 use in EFL classrooms. He found that most students believed it was necessary for teachers to have knowledge of the students’ L1 (Japanese), and that the L1 should be used in EFL classes by both the students and their teachers. This result was particularly pronounced for low English proficiency students and, rather surprisingly, for postgraduate students with high levels of English proficiency (Burden, 2000). These findings are reflected in a more recent study by Clancy (2018), who examined the views of 75 Japanese university students about L1 usage in their EFL classes. Results of the survey showed that most students (85.71%) believed that the L1 should be used to aid learning in EFL classes, and two-thirds (66.29%) of them preferred their foreign EFL teacher to be fluent in the students’ L1 of Japanese (Clancy, 2018).

Moore (2013) examined the influence of context on the quantity of L1 used by 12 Japanese university students preparing oral presentations in an EFL task-based learning course, and found that context had a substantial influence on students’ L1 use. Results showed that the six pairs of oral presenters gradually used less L1 over time as their preparation progressed from initial planning discussions towards the actual production, and highlighted influential contextual factors such as learners’ L2 proficiency, engagement with the task and partner, and negotiation of the task itself (Moore, 2013).

Positive Uses of the L1 in Classroom Learning

Teachers need to be freed from inhibitions that they may have about using the L1 (Cook, 2001). According to Moore (2013), “... L1 use arises naturally and productively in L2/bilingual discourse and ... that what is optimal [use] may depend on specific contextual conditions” (p. 251). Hall and Cook (2012) list many different ways that learners’ L1 can be used productively in English classes. These include “... conveying meaning and explaining grammar, organising classroom activities, maintaining discipline, building rapport and forming relationships between teacher and learners, and use of the [L1] for testing” (Hall and Cook, 2012, p. 282). Similarly, Auerbach (1993) proposes several different uses of the L1 in classrooms, including classroom management, language analysis, teaching grammar rules, discussing cross-cultural issues, giving instructions, explaining errors, and checking for understanding. In addition, in one of the earliest studies to promote L1 usage in class, (Atkinson, 1987, p. 242) argued there are “... several general advantages of judicious use of the [L1].” These include grammar explanations, confirming comprehension, issuing instructions, discussing classroom management, and checking for meaning (p. 242).

Polio & Duff (1994) found that teachers used their students’ L1 for explaining grammar, managing classes, translating unknown vocabulary, showing empathy, and generally supporting learners to improve understanding of the L2 (Polio & Duff, cited in Hall & Cook, 2012). In addition, Tsukamoto (2011) reports that the use of L1 enables improved student comprehension and maximises the efficient use of class-time, and that it helps to maintain a comfortable class atmosphere. In a similar vein, Littlewood and Yu (2011) highlight the ‘reassuring’ role the L1 can be in the classroom and the potentially alienating effects of English-only teaching. Therefore, teachers need to consider whether students feel comfortable with the L2, “while recognizing the importance of the L1 as a source of security and support” (p. 72). This is confirmed by Burden (2000) who found the main reasons given for a suitable L1 usage by teachers were “relaxing the students,” and thus “creating a more relaxed, humanistic classroom where they can freely express themselves” (p. 139).

In a recent literature review, Clancy (2018) confirmed similar findings by many previous studies on the L1 usage in EFL classrooms. For example, teachers typically use the students’ L1 to explain new words and grammar, to manage classrooms, to make a relaxing atmosphere and improve teacher-student relationships (Clancy, 2018, p. 14).

Bilingual Dictionaries

According to one researcher, 85% of students find a bilingual dictionary useful for learning vocabulary

(Schmitt, 1997). A bilingual dictionary is a monolingual dictionary that includes translations. The use of bilingual dictionaries is common in classrooms and has almost unanimous support by researchers. The reason for such strong support, according to Nation (2003), is studies that compare the effectiveness of various methods for learning the meaning of an unknown word have "... always come up with the result that an L1 translation is the most effective." This is further confirmed by Cummins (2007), who states "Research consistently supports the efficacy of bilingual dictionary use for vocabulary learning ..." (p. 226). It is considered as 'natural language behaviour' to search for an interpretation or translation when something is not understood in the L2. Therefore, effective teaching strategies should include translation activities and using bilingual dictionaries (Stern, 1992). Moreover, the learning of L2 vocabulary using L1-L2 word pairs, which is popular with Japanese learners, is confirmed by research as a very effective method of learning (Nation, 2003, p. 4).

Conclusion

The research findings reviewed in this paper constitute strong support for using students' L1 to assist their learning L2 in EFL classes. In particular, the findings emphasize the important role that the L1 plays in L2 learning as well as L2 use. Therefore, the L1 needs to be regarded positively as an important resource for learning the L2, and to be used appropriately by teachers.

Though English should be clearly prioritised as the main language used in EFL classrooms, the use of students' L1 also has a place in making the teaching and learning process more effective. The L1 could be used, for example, to reduce students' anxiety, to create a positive classroom atmosphere, to explain grammar and new vocabulary items, and in translation activities and testing.

In Japanese universities, most EFL classes consist entirely of students whose L1 is Japanese. Consequently, these students need to be encouraged and supported in using and speaking English as much as possible in every EFL class. However, learning English should not require students to avoid, ignore or conceal their L1, which is a rich resource and linguistic foundation for learning their L2.

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