

The Role of the Mother Tongue in EFL Classrooms.

EFL 授業における母国語の役割

John Holthouse

外国語を学んだことがある人のほとんどは、自分の母国語を媒介として外国語学習をすることが学習の役立つと思っている。このようにして新しい言語に適応するのはごく自然なことである。にもかかわらず、前世紀のほとんどの間、英語教師はクラスで英語だけを話すようにと学生に指導をしてきた。1970年代から栄えたコミュニカティヴ・メソッドもこの「英語だけ」の方針にますます信頼性を与えることになった。しかし、近年、この「英語だけ」の方針に対して深刻な疑問が投げかけられるようになった。きちんとした授業計画を立てる際、異なる学習環境、特にESL/EFLの違いを考慮に入れなければならない。このような新しい意識の中で避けることができない結論は学習者の母国語がEFLの授業において役に立つということである。

キーワード：

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Having taught in Japanese universities for ten years, it strikes me as odd that the notion that native teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) should use *only* English in the classroom remains virtually unquestioned. One must assume that this is a result of administrators and course planners taking the position that standard Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) doctrines, including the 'English only' imperative, represent the state of the art. The extent to which such a view actually reflects reality or enjoys support worldwide is debatable, however. These days, increasing numbers of teachers and researchers are questioning the validity of the assumption that limited mother tongue (MT) usage impedes successful second language (L2) learning. I feel the time has come to reconsider whether or not this fixation with 'English only' is truly justifiable.

Background

According to Harbord (1992), the idea of trying to eliminate MT usage from language teaching classrooms dates back to around the beginning of the twentieth century with the birth of the direct method. At the time, "the development of ELT as a casual career for young people visiting Europe encouraged teachers to make a virtue of the necessity of using only English"

(Harbord 1992: 350). This trend was reinforced by the corresponding development of a training movement in Britain aimed at equipping young teachers with the skills necessary for handling multilingual classes.

By the 1970s, CLT theorists had thoroughly popularized the idea that using the MT in the classroom is counter-productive. Krashen, in particular, was influential in this area. He claimed that 'learning' (as opposed to acquisition) is not especially helpful, and stressed instead the need for learners to be exposed to as much spoken English 'input' as possible. He suggested that, with sufficient amounts of input, L2 skills would be acquired (more or less by a process of osmosis) through the mysterious 'affective filter'.

Although conclusive evidence in support of the 'English only' position remained scarce, there were no serious challengers to the status quo until the publication of Swan's articles in the 1980s. He argued that although language learners sometimes make errors as a result of interference from the MT, a lot what learners get *right* is done with reference to it as well. "In fact, if we did not keep making correspondences between foreign language items and mother tongue items, we would never learn foreign languages at all" (Swan 1985: 85). Thankfully, we are not 'blank slates' though. We are able to draw on our existing knowledge as a point of comparison, rather than having to learn to understand the world and everything in it all over again. Although there may be significant differences between the structures of the learner's L1 and L2, at least the MT provides something to work with.

Swan noted, with refreshing honesty, that we really know little about how languages are learnt, and tend to "work largely by hunch, concealing our ignorance under a screen of pseudo-science and jargon" (Swan 1985: 86). An unfortunate side effect of this is that we are susceptible to fads and 'silver bullets', so it is possible for an idea to have an impact incommensurate to its actual worth. I would suggest that this has been the case with the 'English only' mantra.

The Importance of the ESL/EFL Distinction

It seems to me that the gravest mistake proponents of strictly 'English only' classes make is in overlooking the huge contrast between EFL and ESL settings. In the ESL setting, students converge from many different countries and therefore have no choice but to use English to communicate with each other. In every aspect of their daily lives they need to use English to attend to their basic needs. However, when dealing with monolingual groups of students it seems futile to pretend that the MT does not exist. As Cook (1999: 202) puts it:

"Although the practical issue of diverse L1s requires the consistent use of the L2 in

multilingual classes, this restriction should not apply to those classes where the students share a common L1. L2 users have the L1 permanently present in their minds. Every activity the students carry out visibly in the L2 also involves the invisible L1. The apparent L2 nature of the classroom covers up the presence of the L1 in the minds of the students". As teachers in university classrooms across Japan are all too aware, if communication in English breaks down it is extremely difficult for students to resist the temptation to fall back on their MT. Furthermore, as soon as the students leave the classroom, they only hear Japanese being spoken around them, so they have absolutely no motivation to strive to use English all the time. In these circumstances, "we need to present a realistic view of the English language attainable in an EFL setting" (Takada 1999: 1).

Teachers can exhort students to 'think in English' until they are blue in the face if they wish, but this is asking too much in the short term. As Atkinson (1987) and others have suggested, thinking in English can only be a distant goal, and is something that becomes natural at advanced levels of proficiency. The reality is that most Japanese students of English will never approach native levels of English speaking fluency unless they study abroad for several years. There is nothing unusual or shameful in that. The greatest service a native speaking university English teacher can do for his or her students (especially non-English majors) is, by working on basic communication skills and establishing a certain level of warmth and trust, to foster in them some self-confidence and a sense that if they decide to strive seriously for native-like proficiency, they have the potential to achieve their goal. The greatest service we can do for ourselves as teachers is not to drive ourselves mad by trying to outlaw Japanese in the classroom entirely or allow feelings of guilt to creep in if we use the MT sometimes. Although I am not proposing that the MT should be given a large role in native speaker classes, it has the potential to be used in a systematic way, and therefore be a useful resource to draw upon occasionally.

Establishing Realistic Goals

Given that most of our students are not going to attain native-like proficiency, surely we need to set more realistic learning goals. Having basic communicative competence in English will undoubtedly be valuable in business and leisure activities for our students in the future. However, it is now widely acknowledged that, at the worldwide level, English is most often used as a medium for communication between non-native speakers. Recognition of this has led to the recent growth of EIL (English as an International Language). EIL includes the understanding that English now belongs to all those who use it, and hence raises questions about the value placed on closely

modeling 'authentic' native speaker English in EFL classes.

Cook (1999), for instance, draws parallels with academic consensus regarding studies on ethnocentrism that conclude that one group should not be measured against the norms of another (be it white people against black, middle class against working class, and so on). This being the case, he argues that English grammar, pronunciation, or vocabulary choices made by learners that differ somewhat to native usage should not be picked on as signs of failure to become native speakers. On the contrary, he argues they can be viewed as samples of another variety of English. Indeed, a major survey of 50 Japanese university level EFL teachers and 660 students investigating various beliefs about the status of English in Japan and how it should be taught revealed that "most teachers seem to believe that it is almost impossible or at least not necessary for every Japanese to become bilingual in the present EFL environment ... and many seem to accept Japanese English as a legitimate variety" (Matsuura et al. 2000: 479).

Therefore, if we are truly teaching 'communication' we should not dwell on minor differences to native speaker English that do not hinder understanding of the message. Most native teachers in Japan would probably agree that one significant obstacle to an appreciable general improvement in the ability of Japanese to communicate in English is their tendency to get obsessed with minor details and to want to be absolutely 'correct'. I have no doubt that most native teachers *do* actually try to tell their students to focus on getting their meaning across, rather than lapsing into silence by worrying about the correctness of the form. But by repeatedly insisting on 'English only', are we not unconsciously sending our students a contradictory message? In other words, we seem to be telling them "To utter some Japanese is a mistake, and we don't like *that* kind of mistake!" How can we expect students to loosen up and experiment with the language a little if at the same time we are forever warning them that we will be upset to hear anything besides English pass their lips?

"Methodologists' insistence on the L2 does not mean that the L1 has not in practice been used in most classrooms" (Cook 1999: 200). Possibly the most common way this has taken place is through code-switching. Code-switching, or alternating between two languages, is "a natural and purposeful phenomenon which facilitates both communication and learning" (Eldridge 1996: 310), commonly observed in real life situations involving speakers from the same L1 background using an L2, for example in immigrant communities in any part of the world. It has been the subject of numerous studies in recent years.

A study of Turkish high school English classes found that "the majority of code-switching in the classroom is highly purposeful, and related to pedagogical goals" (Eldridge 1996: 303). It tended to be useful to students in terms of equivalence (substituting Turkish for unknown

vocabulary items), floor-holding, metalanguage, reiteration (usually to confirm or clarify something said in English), maintaining group membership (ensuring they don't look 'uncool' to their friends while grappling with an unfamiliar language), and conflict control (to avoid misunderstandings between students).

Obviously, the danger of fossilization would have to be kept in mind by language learners hoping to develop advanced proficiency levels. Moreover, strategies for coping with communication breakdowns with speakers from other L1 backgrounds would need to be developed at some point. However, neither caveat negates the potential benefits to be reaped if teachers give their blessing to, *and utilize the product of*, code-switching in first year Japanese university English communication classes.

Working *With* Our Students, Not Against Them

Since English is an international language which is no longer the exclusive property of one particular group, "it is reasonable that the way in which this language is taught should not be linked to a particular culturally influenced methodology; rather the language should be taught in a manner consistent with local cultural expectations" (McKay 2002: 118).

In recent years, numerous studies conducted in Japan have revealed that students prefer some MT usage in the classroom. For example, "while most students appear to believe that English education should aim toward teaching practical uses of English, i.e., listening and speaking skills, many express reluctance to participate in English-only classes" (Matsuura et al. 2000: 486). In a survey of 290 university students, Burden (2000) found that 73% thought both native teachers and students should speak some Japanese in the classroom. Among 210 of my own Kansai University non-English majors, 85% responded that I should use some Japanese in the classroom, while 60% thought they should be able to as well.

In this case, perhaps we would be well advised to take the preferences of our students into consideration a little more often. As Harbord (1992: 351) notes:

"Translation/transfer is a natural phenomenon and an inevitable part of second language acquisition even where no formal classroom learning occurs. Learners will inevitably (and even unconsciously) attempt to equate a target language structure or lexical item with its closest or most common correlate in the mother tongue, regardless of whether or not the teacher offers or 'permits' translation".

(One must remember that translation as a technique is different from translation as the goal of teaching).

It does not make sense to try and prevent students from using learning strategies that they believe are effective for them. It is only logical to point out that the more students believe in the learning method they are using, the greater their chances of getting some positive results for their efforts. Studies, (Horwitz 1988) for example, have born this out as well.

Although native speaker teachers usually follow CLT theory by trying to focus on activities involving the exchange of meaning, students are often more interested in formal aspects of the L2. Shimizu (1995) argues that a probable reason for the apparent detachment of many Japanese students in the classroom is their disinclination to performing activities they regard as trivial. It may be that they are waiting for activities more in line with their expectations.

McKay (2002) documents numerous other cases that raise doubts about the appropriateness of using the standard form of CLT in EFL contexts. For instance, a survey of Chinese university teachers in 1989 found that they believed CLT to be incompatible with the needs of most of their students. Similar feelings were expressed in Korea, where teachers spoke of the unwillingness of their students to participate in traditional CLT activities. Consequently, they noted the need to develop an approach suitable for their own context, rather than rely on expertise, methodology, and materials controlled and dispensed by Western ESL countries.

Similarly, a Pakistani university teacher related how, when she tried to move away from her usual approach to more communicative methodology, students resisted, stopped doing homework, and asked her to return to her former style. She later realized that by surrendering some control of what students said and did, and by trying to give students more control over their learning, she was overturning cultural understandings about the authority structure in the classroom. Consequently, “by stepping out of her traditional role and changing the routine structure of the classroom event, this seemed to provide a sanction to the learners to indulge in forms of behavior that would be termed deviant in the framework of a traditional classroom” (McKay 2002:115).

Weighing up the evidence from these various sources across Asia, it seems impossible to escape the conclusion that the some of our students must find it hard to take our (‘English only’, standard CLT) classes seriously. Might it not be time for native speaking university teachers in EFL contexts to abandon the failed dogma of CLT *our way* (in particular the ‘English only’ part), and start paying some attention to what students feel is the best way for them to acquaint themselves with the language?

Possible Roles for the Mother Tongue in the Classroom

Discussions of Classroom Methodology

Japanese students making the transition from typical high school English classes to first year university level classes taught by native speakers are likely to experience a degree of surprise at the methodology they encounter. This would be true even if a limited amount of MT usage were accepted as part of the regular fabric of the course. Therefore teachers need to acclimatize the students to the demands of their new learning environment. The most fundamental way of doing so is to give simple explanations of the philosophy of L2 learning underlying the classroom activities they will be asked to perform. "If students are unfamiliar with a new approach, the teacher who cannot or will not give an explanation in L1 may cause considerable student de-motivation" (Harbord 1992: 352). When students understand why they are doing an unfamiliar type of activity they are more likely to view it as beneficial, and if they accept that it is beneficial they are more likely to make a genuine effort to do it.

Checking Comprehension

We are all, no doubt, familiar with the experience of telling a group of Japanese students something, asking if they have understood, watching them all nod their heads, then noticing sometime afterwards that, in the case of some of them at least, the message has not got through at all. The MT can be used to check that students have actually understood something the teacher has said to them in English. In other words, a teacher might say a sentence in English, then ask students how to say the same thing in Japanese.

An additional benefit of doing this with relatively low level students would be to give them opportunities to observe the degree of structural equivalence between Japanese and English, and draw conclusions of their own. They would probably come to notice the futility of relying solely on direct translation from Japanese when trying to communicate in English (thus reinforcing what the teacher should have already told them anyway).

Co-operation Among Students

Similarly, for weaker students who are experiencing difficulty, for example, in understanding the teacher's explanation in English of how to use a particular grammatical structure closely linked to the main focus of the lesson, sometimes a brief explanation in Japanese from a classmate who has understood can overcome the impasse quickly.

Also, students can sometimes gain valuable insights (about the L2, or more general matters)

by comparing or discussing their work with their peers sometimes. “The advantages of such activities are so great that at lower levels it will be more beneficial to allow students to do this thoroughly in L1 than to do it tokenistically in L2 or not at all” (Harbord 1992: 354).

Eliciting Language

The MT could play a role in vocabulary building sometimes, for example by asking students how to say a particular (Japanese) word in English. Doing so can be quicker and more efficient than giving explanations, gesturing or the like. When students only have about 40 hours with the native speaking teacher all year, it can be wasteful to spend time with elaborate mimes or descriptions of a word when a simple translation would do. Context can, of course, change the meaning of a word, so the teacher would need to be careful not to give the impression that word for word translation is always useful.

Teachers would be better advised to concentrate on ‘functional translation’ (transferring *meaning* into English, not translating word for word). This might entail, for example, using exercises involving the translation of words or phrases *in context* within larger chunks of text, thereby drawing students’ attention to the limitations of direct translation. By ‘text’ I mean manageable samples of language taken from contemporary sources (for instance, a brief exchange between two characters in a popular movie relevant to the theme of the lesson).

Giving Instructions

The usual ‘English only’ argument is that we need to give students every possible opportunity to hear English used for real communication. Classroom communication is a distinct genre, characterized by the Initiation, Response, and Feedback interaction sequence (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975), not found in other areas of life. Therefore, it seems likely to be relatively unimportant to students.

It is true that listening to a teacher explain how to perform a particular classroom activity amounts to ‘genuine communication’, but when more complex explanations prove difficult for students to understand, surely one needs to weigh up the potential benefits of persisting with labored repetitions of the explanation (when at least half the class has already understood) against the obvious downside (the loss of already scarce class time). It could, arguably, be described as basic common sense to call on the more proficient students to repeat the explanation in Japanese in this kind of situation. Also, as noted above, there are often students who pretend to have understood but actually have not.

Development of Useful Learning Strategies

As suggested earlier, the natural tendency for students engaged in English conversation activities is to try to translate word for word directly from Japanese. Inevitably, they sooner or later arrive at a point where they have a particular (Japanese) word or expression in mind, but don't know how to express it in English. At this time, students tend to give up, revert to speaking entirely in Japanese, or ask the teacher how to say the word or expression in English. Obviously, none of these reactions would be suitable in an encounter with someone unable to understand Japanese. Therefore, teachers need to encourage students to make better use of their existing knowledge of English to get their message across in a different way.

The MT can play a constructive role in helping students cultivate a wider range of strategies for expressing themselves. A potentially useful technique is to have students working in groups of three, with (at any given time) two of them engaged in discussing a topic in English and the third member taking notes of any instances of Japanese usage. Each member would have a turn as note taker. Finally the teacher would have the groups (possibly merged into larger groups) go through the lists of Japanese lexical items and try to come up with alternate ways of expressing the same ideas. This would most commonly involve the use of simplification or approximate synonyms (a *goka na*, or luxurious, house might be described as “very nice”, for example), negative antonyms (*takai*, as in something expensive, might be expressed as “not cheap”), circumlocution (*arubaito o yamemashita*, or “I quit my part-time job” could become “I stopped working part-time”), or explanation (a *rezoko*, or refrigerator, could be described in various ways, “a big, cold, food box in the kitchen”, for instance).

Generating positive atmosphere

Critchley (2002) notes that research into immediacy, or physical and psychological closeness between people, has found that students who like and respect a teacher are far more likely to respond with greater overall effort in his or her class, to actually learn more, and to maintain a positive attitude to that subject years after graduating from that particular teacher's class. Given the potential benefits of positive student-teacher relationships, when faced with unmotivated or lower level students who are not open to or capable of any meaningful exchanges in English, the teacher would be justified in trying to work towards some sort of mini 'breakthrough' via the MT.

The possibilities discussed above are mostly rather general, but for those interested in more practical suggestions, Deller and Rinvulcri (2002) list over a hundred teaching ideas involving the use of the MT.

Using the Mother Tongue Judiciously

There is, of course, a need for caution in utilizing the MT in the EFL classroom. Atkinson (1987: 246) acknowledges this by noting the potential for the following undesirable outcomes of overuse:

1. The teacher and/or the students begin to feel that they have not ‘really’ understood any item of language until it has been translated.
2. The teacher and/or the students fail to observe the distinctions between equivalence of form, semantic equivalence, and pragmatic features, and thus oversimplify to the point of using crude and inaccurate translation.
3. Students speak to the teacher in the mother tongue as a matter of course, even when they are quite capable of expressing what they mean.
4. Students fail to realize that during many activities in the classroom it is essential that they use only English.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to re-iterate that I am not advocating the abandonment of CLT and all that it stands for. I am, however, convinced that teachers need to think more carefully about the EFL/ESL distinction, take more serious notice of student beliefs about learning and classroom preferences, and act accordingly. The use of the MT in EFL classrooms is one obvious area in which we might act.

As McKay (2002: 116) rightly notes, “there is no one best method, and no one method that is best for a particular context”. In the final analysis, choosing the best approach to use with a particular group of students should come down to a mixture of observation, cultural and interpersonal sensitivity, experience, and experimentation on the part of the teacher. This has been described by Prabhu (1990) as a teacher’s ‘sense of plausibility’.

Holliday (1994) argues that there are two types of CLT; a ‘weak’ version, developed largely in private institutions in countries where English is the native language, which emphasizes a lot of discussion in pairs and groups, and a ‘strong’ version, developed in public education systems (primary, secondary, or tertiary) in the same countries. In this form of CLT, more attention is given to analyzing *how language works* in particular settings. It is communicative in that students ‘communicate’ with a text. Students are allowed to use their MT when necessary to work together on exercises arising from the text, but they must report their results in English. Holliday suggests

that this version may be well suited to EFL settings. A mounting body of evidence indicates that it is, at least, a point worthy of consideration.

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