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Practice Article

Non-Native Japanese Speaking Teachers' Use of Japanese in University EFL Classrooms

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Abstract

While teachers using Japanese in the EFL classroom is still a hotly debated issue, recently there has been a wealth of research that shows Japanese can be a useful tool in Japanese university English classes (Bartlett, 2017; Joyce, 2021). However, non-native Japanese-speaking teachers may find it difficult to reap the benefits of using Japanese due to a number of reasons such as insufficient language proficiency, low confidence, or the time commitment needed to prepare materials in Japanese. This practice-based paper will explore some of the current research on teachers' Japanese use and describe how this research was implemented in EFL courses at a Japanese university by a non-native speaker of Japanese. Afterwards, the author will share some reflections and give suggestions for other non-native Japanese speaking teachers interested in using Japanese in their teaching.

日本で第二言語としての英語の授業を日本語で教えることは、現在でも議論が続いているトッピクだが、日本語が授業で結果的に使用できると述べる論文は、近年増加する一方だ (Bartlett, 2017; Joyce, 2021)。しかし、日本語母語話者ではない教員は、低い日本語能力や劣等感、日本語の教材を作る時間がない等の理由で、日本語で教えた場合の利益を享受出来ない可能性がある。この実践に基づく論文は、教員の日本語使用に関する文献を紹介し、日本語母語話者ではない大学の教員が、この文献の研究結果を授業で実践した方法を説明する。その後、筆者は実践した際の感想を述べ、日本語母語話者以外の教員向けの、日本語を英語の授業で使用する方法の提案をする。

The use of L1 in EFL teaching remains a hotly debated issue. Many researchers argue that an English-only (EO) approach which minimizes the use of students' L1 in the classroom is the preferred method (Ford, 2009; Kawabata, 2024; Nae & Kim, 2018). However, there is a growing amount of research that has shown L1 use to have positive effects on student learning outcomes (Auerbach, 1993; Rouzbahani & Alipour, 2019).

Bartlett (2017) suggests that Japanese university English classrooms in particular are a good context for L1 use in the classroom because the vast majority of students share Japanese as their first language. Moreover, Mari and Carroll (2020) argued that teachers should self-reflect on their L1 use in the classroom with regard to their students' specific needs and resources.

It is with this in mind that I decided to incorporate Japanese use into my teaching in specific and targeted ways. In this practice-based article, I will describe how and why I incorporated my students' L1 (Japanese) into the classroom even though I am not a native speaker of Japanese. I will also provide some suggestions for how other non-native Japanese speaking teachers can effectively use Japanese in the classroom.

Context

I speak Japanese as a second language, and I teach English courses at a private university in western Japan. The university's courses are divided into four levels (Basic, Elementary, Intermediate, and Advanced) based on student aptitude measured by TOEIC score. All students with a TOEIC score below 305 are placed into Basic-level courses. Elementary-level classes require a score of 305–400. Intermediate-level classes require a score of 400–520. Any student who scores higher than 520 is placed in an Advanced level course. All these courses are compulsory for students who are not majoring in English. I teach mainly Elementary- and Intermediate-level courses, and occasionally Basic- or Advanced-level classes. Most of the students are in their first or second year of studies, unless they have failed a course and need to repeat the class in their third or fourth year. The main goal of the courses, according to the standardized syllabus, is to "develop students' ability and confidence in using English to communicate in informal, everyday situations" (Kyoto Sangyo University, 2024).

Need for Japanese in the Classroom

The need for Japanese language use in these courses was caused by several different factors. First, a large

number of the teacher-student interactions in the class had little to do with the course content and instead pertained to classroom management or university policies. Roughly four to five students would approach the teacher during each class to engage in one of these interactions and dealing with these often took up a third of the class time.

Examples of these interactions include explaining detailed university attendance or plagiarism policies, assisting students with purchasing the correct textbooks, and informing students of changes to the class schedule. Many of these interactions require an unreasonably high level of linguistic competence for lower-level learners.

In addition to this, the Covid-19 pandemic also brought about some new challenges while exacerbating those already mentioned. As a required part of the courses, students use a language learning application called EnglishCentral, and the instructor is required to use one of two online classroom management systems in some capacity, either Moodle or Microsoft Teams. Teachers could choose to use both systems in tandem as well, but I opted to only use Moodle. At the beginning of the pandemic, all the courses were moved online and taught synchronously using Zoom. Also, at the same time that teachers and students were trying to get accustomed to this new teaching context, the university was introducing two new required tasks to be completed in the aforementioned online learning application, and a second completely separate yet also required, online learning application (My Mobile World) to be used in some courses. The addition of My Mobile World brought the total number of different applications required to participate in these courses to four. Introducing these different online platforms and tools all at once to students not yet accustomed to university life or life during a global pandemic led to a sharp increase in Japanese-language emails from students requesting technical support for these applications.

Theoretical Framework

Through examining previous research in order to create a theoretical framework to guide my Japanese use in the classroom, three trends emerged: many Japanese students prefer at least some L1 use by their teacher, Japanese is best used with lower-level students, and Japanese can best be used for classroom management or to provide scaffolding.

Student Preferences

One important factor worth taking into account when choosing classroom teaching methods is what students prefer. There are still researchers who argue for EO policies because they believe limiting the amount of L1 use in classrooms improves students' English proficiency (Nae & Kim, 2018) or because there is little research on the efficacy of using Japanese in the EFL classroom (Berger, 2011), However, there is also a growing body of research that suggests Japanese university students prefer L1 support in the classroom.

In a survey conducted by Bartlett (2017) the majority of students felt that use of Japanese in the classroom was a benefit to their language acquisition. One of the reasons provided by the respondents was that they felt more comfortable approaching their teacher if they could use Japanese.

In a similar study the majority of both Japanese English teachers and Japanese university students felt that classroom L1 use was beneficial to learning (Kawabata, 2024). In another study, students displayed a preference for their teacher to be proficient in Japanese (Carson & Kashihara, 2012). Examples of tasks that a proficient teacher would be able to complete in Japanese include explaining complex concepts, comparing and contrasting the Japanese language with the English language, and assisting students in checking comprehension (Carson & Kashihara, 2012).

These sentiments were echoed by participants in a survey conducted by Joyce (2021). The majority of these Japanese university students felt that it was important for their teacher to be able to give explanations in Japanese, speak Japanese well, and allow students to ask questions in Japanese.

A possible reason for Japanese students having these preferences when they reach university is their past experience with English during their primary education. According to Lee (2013), prior to entering university, most Japanese students take English classes where Japanese is the primary or sole language of instruction. These experiences could lead students to become accustomed to learning English through the Japanese language.

Students' English Proficiency

Another factor to consider when deciding when to use students' L1 in the classroom is the English language proficiency of the students in a given class. Lee (2013) argued that L1 use is unavoidable when teaching lower-level Japanese university students. Several reasons for the need to use Japanese with lower-level students have been suggested.

According to Ford (2009) the overall English comprehension ability of first-year Japanese university students has been steadily decreasing every year, and many students are unable to understand basic English speech, making Japanese use necessary to conduct English courses. Lee (2013) also suggested that adopting a strict EO policy with low proficiency students will make it difficult for teachers to build a rapport with the class.

Moreover, with regard to student preferences for L1 use in the classroom, lower-level students tend to desire more Japanese language support in the classroom. In a survey conducted by Carson and Kashihara (2012), students were shown to have a greater desire for their instructors to use Japanese for classroom instruction when students

had lower language abilities. A later study showed similar results with students' preference for Japanese use in the classroom declining as their proficiency increased (Carson, 2018).

However, it is not just students who feel the need for more L1 support at lower levels. Teachers have also been shown to tend to utilize their students L1 as a teaching tool more frequently when teaching lower-level students (Hall & Cook, 2013).

One suggested way to incorporate these research findings into pedagogy is for all teachers to be familiar with Japanese and have lower-level courses taught only by teachers with high Japanese language proficiency (Carson & Kashihara, 2012). While this may not always be feasible for every institution due to staffing restrictions, it could prove to be a useful consideration for administrators when hiring instructors and assigning courses.

Also, low language proficiency is not the only factor that influences student preferences for L1 use. According to Joyce (2021) in addition to low language proficiency, students with low motivation are more likely to desire L1 support. Therefore, teachers could use more Japanese in courses where students have low motivation.

Scaffolding and Classroom Management

The third factor to consider when using Japanese in the classroom is in which situations and for completing which tasks is Japanese best used. Even though Shibasaki (2020) argued for the use of EO policies whenever possible, she still suggested that Japanese could be used for scaffolding.

One study found that teachers and students both tend to prefer that Japanese be used to describe difficult concepts (Carson & Kashihara, 2012). Furthermore, many teachers in Hall and Cook's (2013) study used their students' L1 to explain meanings, vocabulary, or grammar that was unclear. Mora Pablo et al. (2011) found teachers in Mexico used their students' L1, Spanish in this case and not Japanese, for similar functions in their teaching as well.

In addition to scaffolding and clarifying course content, students' L1 can also be used for classroom management. According to Hall and Cook (2013) teachers working with lower-level students were particularly likely to use their students' L1 to maintain discipline in the classroom. All these L1 uses make pragmatic sense, as many of these would require language that is well beyond the abilities of many students. Also, while an argument could be made that these could all lead to teachable moments, in many instances they are likely to fall outside the goals and objectives of many courses.

Description of the Teaching Practice

When first looking at which classes to begin using Japanese in, I decided to follow my discoveries from reading previous research by targeting my lower-level classes. Therefore, I began to provide more L1 linguistic support for my Elementary-level courses, Elementary English Communication I and II, and provided less for Intermediate- and Advanced-level courses.

In my Intermediate- and Advanced-level courses, I teach almost entirely in English with the exceptions of important departmental announcements or if a student specifically requests Japanese language support. Focusing on my Elementary-level courses was a logical first step, as it was in these courses that the largest number of communication issues occurred. These issues happened because there are several aspects of the class that, while required by the university, are not easily presented in English at a level accessible to students in Elementary-level classes. Examples include setting up students' accounts in EnglishCentral and reviewing university attendance and testing policies.

After deciding which courses to use Japanese in, I chose how to implement the language in class. There are five main ways that I began using Japanese in my classes: first, writing bilingual course syllabi; second, writing bilingual posts on Moodle; third, responding to emails in Japanese; fourth, giving certain in-class instructions in Japanese; and fifth, answering student questions in Japanese upon request.

The first use of Japanese in my classes was writing the syllabus. In addition to a general syllabus that is available online, each teacher is expected to provide a more detailed syllabus for each course that they teach. The syllabus that I distribute in each course is bilingual, with information presented in English with a Japanese translation immediately below.

For example, the attendance policy for each course is relatively complicated and tends to cause confusion among students. This is an issue because failing to follow the attendance policy negatively impacts students' grades and failing to attend enough lessons results in an immediate failure of the course. Therefore, this was the first portion of the syllabus that I began providing in English and Japanese. To illustrate this, in the syllabus the English sentence "If you are late due to a train delay, you can be marked present or you can receive an excused absence. However, you need to provide sufficient evidence" is followed by the Japanese translation "電車の遅延のせいで遅刻する場合、遅刻・欠席の代わりに出席・公欠として記録する可能性がありますが、電車の遅延が十分に確認できる物を提出しないといけません" (Kuster, 2024). All these translations were proofread by a native speaker of Japanese to check for accuracy and clarity.

The second use of Japanese is providing bilingual information on Moodle, the online learning platform that the university has adopted for use in all classes. Here all of the instructions for homework assignments, reminders, and the course schedule are posted in both English and Japanese. The information here is presented in the same way as the

syllabus, with a Japanese translation following each piece of English text (Appendix A). All of the translations provided on the online platform were proofread by a native Japanese-speaking colleague before they were posted.

The third use of Japanese is emailing students. The main way that most of my students choose to interact with me outside of class is through email, and most students send their emails in Japanese. They often email to request excused absences or to troubleshoot issues with the various online learning applications. Many of these issues are too complicated for the students to navigate in English. As such, I began responding to any email written in Japanese. Some of the questions that I receive are so common that I made a few Japanese email templates to cut down on my response time to each individual email (Appendix B).

The fourth use of Japanese is giving in-class instructions. Occasionally, I need to give in-class instructions in Japanese, such as when certain textbook activities are very complicated or contain difficult grammar. Giving these instructions in Japanese allows students to complete activities that they otherwise would not be able to complete due to limited English proficiency. Also, there are many times when I use Japanese for classroom management or to make in-class announcements about upcoming university events, exams, etc.

In these moments using English presents three issues. First, many of these instructions would require English that is beyond the students' level. Second, the students might be negatively impacted if they do not understand the information. Third, these announcements are often unrelated to the course itself. Therefore, I use Japanese in instances such as these to avoid taking up too much class time that could be better spent on other activities.

Finally, I use Japanese to answer student questions both during and outside of class during office hours upon the students' request. Many of these questions that the students ask me do not pertain to the class content or would require English that is above their ability to comprehend. Examples of these questions include "Can I get an excused absence for attending a funeral next week?" or "How many points do I still need to receive credit for this class?" One of the most common interactions that I have with students is assisting with technical issues they often encounter while using the various online learning applications used in the course. In these instances, I use Japanese instead of English.

There are a few important things to note about the process I used to have my documents proofread by a native speaker of Japanese. The native speaker who proofread my Japanese documents is an English educator and colleague of mine, who occasionally asks me to proofread their English language documents as well. In order to try and avoid overwhelming them, as they are also very busy, I tried to refrain from sending too many documents to proofread at one time. When I had a document for them to proofread, I requested their assistance via email or in person.

Observations and Reflections

In the following section I will present a few of my observations and reflections of this process. First, I will discuss the benefits of using Japanese in the classroom followed by some limitations and challenges I encountered. Finally, I will share some comments that I received from students about my use of Japanese.

Benefits

As a result of incorporating Japanese language support, overall, my lower-level courses seemed to run more smoothly. There were two main areas where I noticed using Japanese improved the course.

First, the number of student emails, particularly those relating to information covered in the syllabus, greatly decreased. Before providing Japanese language support I was receiving roughly 25 emails a day from students. After incorporating Japanese in my classes this number dropped to about five student emails each day. This was a very welcome development as it allowed me more time to focus on giving students meaningful feedback as opposed to writing copious emails about the university attendance policy. Furthermore, because there were fewer emails, I could respond to each one in a more timely manner, and the students did not need to send as many follow up emails for clarification as the information was in Japanese.

Second, the amount of class time devoted to helping students set up and log in to their EnglishCentral accounts was greatly reduced. When the course was taught only in English, it took upwards of 20 minutes in at least two different class sessions to help students log in to the application and set up their accounts. However, all of this was accomplished in around 15 minutes in one class when the teacher explained the process to the whole class and assisted individual students in Japanese. This allowed for more class time to be devoted to focusing on course content.

I believe that both benefits that I observed were achieved due to the fact that I was using Japanese to provide linguistic support for relatively complex information, as suggested by Carson and Kashihara (2012).

Limitations

There is one area where I think caution might still be required. I did observe that upon realizing that their instructor spoke Japanese, some students would only communicate in Japanese. They would completely ignore very basic instructions in English and would not try to express themselves in English even if they had previously demonstrated the ability to do so. Verbally encouraging these students to use more English did not seem to have an

effect on their motivation to do so. This only happened with a handful of students, so it is not yet a major issue for the courses overall. However, it is still worth addressing, especially if it becomes more widespread, and the effect of verbal encouragement on students' motivation to use English could be a topic for future study. One possible solution might be to have certain periods of class time devoted to the whole class, including the teacher, using only English.

Another limitation that I encountered was the increase to my workload to prepare for my classes. In addition to the changes I made in the classroom, this undertaking also required some personal language development and study. As I am not a native speaker of Japanese, I took extra steps to acquire the language necessary and appropriate for use in the classroom. The language used in academic settings by teachers is different from the language used in everyday conversation. Therefore, in order to develop the tone of a teacher, I studied a variety of materials. Examples of materials I studied included Japanese language syllabi from other courses, Japanese language textbooks, and YouTube videos of university lectures. I paid particular attention to the language used in syllabi and the instructions for textbook activities. I can see how this added workload might be an obstacle for some teachers who are already extremely busy, but I think the benefits justified my time spent studying.

Student Voices

At the end of each semester, I conduct end-of-course surveys with my students where they are able to give their feedback or voice their overall opinion of the course. While not every student mentioned Japanese, a few of them left comments about my use of Japanese in the course. One student commented that they were glad they could email their instructor in Japanese, because they lacked confidence in their English writing ability. Another student said that they were able to easily keep track of the course schedule and meet assignment deadlines because of the Japanese instructions on Moodle. I found these comments to be encouraging, and I believe that conducting a follow-up survey to collect some quantitative data is a good next step.

Recommendations

In general, I would recommend that any teachers who are interested at least try incorporating Japanese into their classroom, and after reflecting on my own experiences, there are a few things that I would suggest to any teachers considering using Japanese themselves.

First, as research has shown, it is probably most appropriately used with lower-level or possibly low-motivation students (Lee, 2013) for the purposes of explaining difficult concepts (Carson & Kashiahra, 2012; Hall & Cook, 2013).

Second, I think it is imperative for non-native speakers of Japanese to seek the aid of a native-speaking proofreader. This can help avoid creating further confusion among students that Japanese grammatical errors might cause. Otherwise, there is a risk of defeating the entire purpose of using Japanese in the classroom. A good proofreader should have strong language skills and preferably be familiar with interacting with students.

Third, teachers should study the Japanese used by teachers in various teaching and academic contexts. Activities such as reading Japanese language syllabi can provide examples of the type of grammar and diction appropriate to use in one's own teaching.

As all of my teaching is done in university contexts, many of the suggestions that I have made are too specific to university teaching to be used in other contexts such as business English courses or children's English education. However, I think that using Japanese could be beneficial in these contexts as well.

While I spent time trying to acquire the specific Japanese vocabulary and language appropriate for a university instructor, I would recommend that teachers in other contexts try to find the language that would best suit their teaching context. For example, a teacher working at a Japanese elementary school could learn the phrases and keywords teachers use when interacting with younger leaners in Japanese. I would also recommend finding a good native-speaking Japanese proofreader who also teaches in that context.

Conclusion

In conclusion, non-native speakers of Japanese can use Japanese as a tool in the classroom. Japanese language ability can be especially helpful when teaching low-level students in compulsory English courses. Also, using Japanese can allow teachers to cut down on time spent in and out of class discussing items that are not part of the course content but are required nonetheless. With a little work, and the help of a good Japanese-speaking proofreader, any teacher can take advantage of their students' L1. Non-native Japanese-speaking English language teachers' use of Japanese is an area that calls for more research and possibly the development of materials such as teaching aids or textbooks.

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Appendix A

Transcription of Bilingual Moodle Announcement

体調不良のため、本日の授業を休講致します。Unit 10の小テストが来週あります。Moodleで「Week 11」にある宿題を来週までに提出してください。

I am cancelling today's class because I am not feeling well. There is a quiz on Unit 10 next week. Please complete the homework posted on Moodle under Week 11 by next week.

Appendix B

Example Email Template and Translation

Japanese:

(名字)さん

(挨拶)。

了解しました。病院の診断書などを提出すれば、本日の欠席を公欠として記録します。

お大事になさってください。

クスター　ウィリアム

English:

(name)

(greeting).

I understand. If you submit some form of documentation from a doctor, I will mark you excused from today's lesson.

Get well soon,

William Kuster