

A Survey on Native English Speaking University Teachers about Using Japanese in Class

Robert LUXTON

ABSTRACT

Attitudes about the use of Japanese by foreign teachers in university level English language classes have changed over the years. Until recently, many or perhaps even most teachers forbid the use of any Japanese. However, teachers now believe that there are specific circumstances when the use of Japanese is acceptable and even beneficial. This paper surveyed ten foreign teachers employed at a national university in western Japan and presents their opinions about the use of Japanese in their classrooms. Although most believe that the use of Japanese is sometimes acceptable, all believe that English should be used as much as possible.

KEYWORDS : native speaker, Grammar Translation Method, Direct Method

For the past 100 years, since the advent of the Direct Method, the use of the students' native language in English language classes has been frowned upon, if not banned outright. The Grammar–Translation method, a form of which is still used in Japanese high schools today, proceeded the Direct Method, and generally employed a great deal of the students' own language. The Direct Method can be seen as a reaction to this, an effort to get students to actually use the target language and become fluent in it, rather than simply effective at writing tests.

The Grammar–Translation method's main concern was preparing students to write entrance examinations, and as such, encouraging students to speak the target language was a secondary concern. This is similar to the situation in Japanese junior high schools and high schools. High school and university entrance examinations, which diligent teachers prepare their students to pass, do not have speaking components, and because of this, Japanese students rarely become fluent speakers of English.

This is where foreign English teachers enter the picture. The Japanese government, school boards and university administrations are well aware that few Japanese can speak English well, and to counter

this, many English native speakers have been employed to teach Japanese students to use the vocabulary and grammar they have memorized, in conversation. The job description for foreign teachers is thus often quite narrow: Get the students to speak English. Communicative methods of English instruction, following in the footsteps of the Direct Method, have generally discouraged the use of L1 in the classroom, and native speaking English teachers in Japan, being employed to teach speaking, have generally followed this prescript.

However, there are changes in thinking occurring across the world of English teaching. Whereas, until recently, the policy in conversation classes across Japan and much of the world has often been “English Only”, the pendulum has been swinging back from this extreme. Today, many writers and theorists believe that limited use of the students' own language, the L1, can in fact have a positive effect on the teaching of English, the L2.

With much of the recent literature advocating limited use of L1 in the classroom, it was thought that a survey of foreign English teachers in Japan would show what the teachers themselves think about using Japanese in their classrooms. To this end, a small–scale open ended survey of five ques-

tions was given to 10 native English speakers at a national university in Western Japan. The results showed that, much as the literature prescribes, most teachers believe that limited uses of Japanese in the classroom can in certain circumstances be warranted.

Question 1: What is your attitude toward using Japanese in your university EFL classroom?

All of the teachers surveyed believed that L1 use in the classroom should be minimal. There were some differences of opinion, however, concerning teacher use and student use. One of the teachers uses no Japanese herself. As she pointed out: "I feel that the students understand enough of what I am saying to complete the tasks I give them." This teacher does, however, allow the students to occasionally discuss the given instructions in Japanese among themselves, which can be seen as a support system for lower level students who may not sufficiently understand instructions in English. Of the ten teachers surveyed, this was the only one who used absolutely no Japanese herself in class.

One teacher pointed out that use of the L1 by the teacher can have a negative effect on student English use. "I limit my own use of Japanese, mainly because they sometimes stop trying to speak English to me if I use Japanese with them." This is a very important observation. Getting students to use English in class is a difficult task. Students are often shy, unsure of their English abilities, and, unless very disciplined, often tempted to take the easy way out by expressing themselves in Japanese. A good way for a teacher to avoid these problems is by rarely using Japanese.

A number of teachers in the survey mentioned that the use of Japanese by the teacher can save time in the classroom. As one teacher explained: "A couple of quick words in Japanese to get over a sticking point can also help the class make more ef-

ficient use of their time because more time can be spent on something more important." Another teacher made a similar observation: "There are times when a simple translation of a word or concept is a huge time saver, which can trump the possible language benefit of trying to explain it several times in English." An argument can be made that explanations should always be made in English because they fulfill the requirement of communicative language teaching that teaching situations be authentic; following instructions are one of the most authentic situations that exist in a classroom. However, as the teachers quoted above point out, there is a fine line between wasting time and authentic language use.

One teacher in the survey made the keen observation that the size of the class is a determining factor in whether or not a teacher should use the students' native language. "I would say it depends on the size of the class. In a class of 20 or more students, it is a very important inter-language tool." Even at the university level, it is not unheard of to have classes of as few as three or four students. However, classes of between 20 and 50 students are much more common. As the teacher quoted implies, in very small classes a teacher can use only English and know that everyone has understood the instructions given in English. On the other hand, in large classes, it is impossible to have the same certainty.

Most teachers working at the university level tend to be long-term residents of Japan. This is true of every teacher involved in this survey. Whereas assistant language teachers in junior high schools and high schools in Japan are often hired in their own countries and arrive in Japan with little or no Japanese ability, at the university level, the situation is quite different. Most foreign university teachers in Japan are at least reasonably fluent in Japanese. Many are completely fluent. And this can create a conundrum in the classroom. Because very few of the students are fluent, but the teachers are, the

easiest way of communicating is through Japanese. Humans have a natural desire to communicate with each other, and this means that in university classrooms in Japan, teachers sometimes feel compelled to use Japanese as a means of communicating with their students. On the other hand, the job at hand is inspiring the students to use English. This often leaves teachers feeling somewhat guilty about using Japanese. As one teacher explained: "Actually though, I should be more strict with student L1 use than I am at the present." Another teacher wrote: "I have a feeling that if I saw a video of myself, I'd see more Japanese used than I would like to think." Both of these teachers make the point that self-discipline is very important is very important in Japanese EFL classrooms.

Question 2: What percentage of your class is conducted in Japanese?

While most respondents answered that about five percent of their classes were conducted in Japanese, one teacher responded that she uses absolutely no Japanese with her students, and at the high end, one teacher responded that as much as 20 percent of his instructions to the class occur in Japanese. "I would say at least 15 to 20 percent of the course...Japanese is used in the class basically when addressing the class as a whole; and the target language is used when talking to students individually or in small groups." One teacher bemoaned the over-use of Japanese by his students. "On the other hand, my students' use of Japanese is over 70%, even when they should be speaking English."

Question 3: Do you think that translation is a valid teaching technique for university EFL students?

Mirroring to some extent the answers to question one, the answers to this question ranged from

"no" to "sometimes." It might be possible to generalize and say that most teachers believe that using translation occasionally is acceptable. However, the mention of "translation" often brings to mind negative associations with the Grammar-Translation method, and some of the responses to the question reflect this. "Grammar-Translation is still used as a method by many current Japanese teachers of English. It's a terrible method and should be discouraged for courses that are supposed to promote general English proficiency." Another teacher referred to "yakudoku", or reading translation, a technique used by many Japanese English teachers. "I disapprove of *yakudoku* mainly because of the large amount of time that is devoted to getting a 'perfect' Japanese translation." Using translation as the primary method of a class was criticized by one teacher as wasting time. "It is not valid where it is misused in many literature classes where the teacher-centered lesson is focused on one student 'translating-and-presenting' and the teacher 'correcting-and-advising' while the rest of the class just waits for their turn." Many foreign English teachers are critical of Japanese English teaching techniques because of what they see as a low level of effectiveness. After all, it is well known that very few Japanese people attain fluency in English. The techniques employed by foreign teachers are considerably different, perhaps complementary. It is fair to say that the teachers surveyed for this paper do not think highly of the Grammar-Translation method.

Other teachers interpreted the question (which was intentionally vague) less as a reference to a method in general than as a supplement to communication based classes. As one teacher explained: "For instance, it would be valid when students need to understand a particular sentence in detail, and the teacher tells everyone to translate it." Most of the textbooks used by foreign English teachers in Japan are monolingual. When new and difficult construc-

tions or sentences are introduced, particularly in a large class, using translation is one of the few options available to ensure comprehension.

Translating a student's Japanese into English, moreover, can be seen as a very organic method of teaching. What could be more natural than encouraging a student to learn to say in English precisely what he or she wants to. In this sense, translation is widely used within the English teaching community.

Question 4: When do you think it is acceptable for the teacher to speak English in a university ESL class?

The answers to this question again conveyed the sense that Japanese should be used as little as possible. In other words, the teacher should use as much English as possible. However, the teachers surveyed listed several discrete times when Japanese is not only appropriate but beneficial.

One instance when Japanese is appropriate is as a last resort. Particularly in low level classes, instructions given in English may not be understood by the students, even if repeated. One teacher wrote that he uses Japanese, "If explanations or directions have been tried in English and the students are still not understanding what the teacher wants after several attempts." At a certain point, trying to communicate instructions in English can become a waste of valuable class time. In cases such as these, using Japanese can be appropriate.

Explaining English grammar was thought by some to be best done in the students' native language. As one teachers said, "depending on the level, it could be used to explain the mechanics of the language." Another teacher, who teaches a phonetics class, has found that using Japanese terminology for technical terms is useful. As she wrote, "Even some native English speakers would have trouble with some of the technical terms, so I don't

expect the Japanese students to understand them." In this, the teacher is referring to terms such as "diphthong" and "consonant." One could generalize from this and say that, when explaining difficult concepts, it is sometimes appropriate to use the students' own language. It might also be said that teaching terms such as "diphthong" would take away valuable time from actually learning how to diphthongs work.

Speaking in a second language can be a nerve-racking experience for some students, particularly shy students. Several teachers pointed out that, in some circumstances, speaking Japanese to such students can have a calming effect. As one teacher said, she speaks Japanese "with students who feel traumatized speaking English." Another teacher wrote that the same effect can be created for the class as a whole. She wrote that the teacher can use Japanese "as an ice-breaker. To make students feel relaxed, such as in the first class, to ease the tension the student might be feeling when suddenly faced with an unknown 'gaijin'".

Some teachers also explained that the teacher using a second language, Japanese, can have an inspirational effect on the students. "When the students see a foreigner communicate in Japanese, it could make them feel that communicating in another language may be an attainable goal. After all, if he/she has done it, so can I." One of the most difficult obstacles to overcome in a Japanese English language classroom is the idea that many Japanese seem to hold that Japanese are not capable of speaking English. And, as most language teachers know, confidence in one's own ability to speak a second language is crucial.

A teacher using Japanese can also encourage closeness between the teacher and students. As one teacher wrote: "Speaking only in English may create a barrier between teacher and students. Switching to Japanese occasionally shows students that you have accepted their language/culture and made it

your own. It builds a bridge between you and the students and may encourage them to do the same.” A close bond between the teacher and students is also crucial for effective teaching, and in some cases, using Japanese with students may help to create that bond.

The one teacher in the survey who uses next to no Japanese in class pointed out a pragmatic use of Japanese in the classroom. As she wrote, she only uses Japanese if “a student’s life is in danger.” This may seem overly dramatic, but in a country as ravaged by earthquakes as Japan, it makes sense. Another teacher also wrote that she would use Japanese with the students when giving instructions during an earthquake.

Although there are many circumstances when the use of Japanese is appropriate, the overall sense from the survey was that English should be used whenever possible, with a few exceptions.

Question 5: When do you think it is acceptable for the students to speak Japanese in a university EFL class?

There was a greater range of opinions generated by this question than any other. Some teachers believe that allowing students to speak Japanese is not an issue, while others believe that it should be used as little as possible. The teachers listed specific circumstances when it is acceptable.

The most accepting teacher wrote: “I think it is acceptable whenever they feel like it. Sometimes the teacher forces them to speak English and the students just can’t. However, using Japanese creates opportunities for feedback that if used appropriately can turn into meaningful learning experiences. As long as the goals of the course, class or activity are understood by students, using Japanese should not be an issue.” This is the most liberal opinion of any of the surveyed teachers. However, even here,

the teacher’s clear intention is that the students should speak as much English as possible, which is the above stated goal of the class.

At the other end of the spectrum is the opinion that students should almost always be speaking English. When asked when students should use Japanese in class, the teacher replied: “Ideally, never. If students were more cognizant of their end-goal (speaking English as well as possible so as to have a better chance of landing a good job or making use of their skills), they would seize the somewhat limited opportunities they have to speak and attain fluency. Alas, most of them do not see this. It is nigh impossible to stop them, though that doesn’t stop me from trying.” Many teachers can probably sympathize with this opinion. Actually getting the students to speak in English at all can often be a difficult task.

Other teachers, falling somewhere between these two extremes, listed specific circumstances when it is appropriate for the students to use Japanese. One teacher mentioned the concept of scaffolding, a term that is used in the literature on ESL frequently. “It could be useful as scaffolding: For example, I might have students work out the meaning of a text in groups, allowing them to use Japanese, before having them present the material using English.” In this case, Japanese becomes a tool for understanding English.

Conclusion.

Times have changed. In the past, few foreign English teachers would ever have admitted to using Japanese in their ESL classroom. As we have seen from this survey, however, many teachers now believe that there are specific times and appropriate circumstances when using Japanese is acceptable. Although there were a range of opinions, essentially the teachers surveyed believe that the teachers and

students should be using as much English as possible. However, unlike in the past, using Japanese in the classroom is no longer thought by most to be forbidden.