The Use of Japanese in College English Classes

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By their nature, foreign language classes introduce a conflict between the use of the mother tongue and the foreign language. True communication can usually be carried out more effectively in the mother tongue, but in the foreign language classroom teachers and students create an artifical environment where the foreign language is used for communication purposes in order to gain proficency. This gain in proficiency represents the long-term target of using the foreign language in natural communicative situations and its benefits are easy to comprehend for students, but the short-term problems of communicating in a foreign language are often highly frustrating. In this conflict, students offer wonder why they should communicate in a foreign language when it would be much easier to use the mother tongue.

In Nagoya Institute of Technology, this issue has gained importance for two reasons. Firstly, some students have complained that their teacher uses too much Japanese in English class. Secondly and conversely, other students have complained that they cannot understand their teacher's English and wish that the teacher would use more Japanese to help the students.

This paper describes a study which attempts to quantify and analyse these student remarks to allow us to get a better overall view about the amount of Japanese that should be used in college English classes. In order to establish overall student preferences for the use of Japanese in English classes, I decided to replicate a study carried out by Burden (2000) which investigated the same issues. A questionnaire consisting of 15 questions was used to establish the students preferences for the use of Japanese in the classroom. The first three questions of the questionnaire address the primary issues of the study. Question one addresses the important matter of whether an English teacher in a Japanese university should know Japanese or not. The answer to this question has implications for both classroom practice and administrative matters such as the hiring of teachers. Question two asks the students whether the teacher should use Japanese in the classroom. The answer to this question obviously depends on question one because a teacher who does not know Japanese cannot use it, but despite this dependence the two questions address two entirely different issues. It is quite possible (and common in practice) for teachers to have lived a long time in Japan and to be highly fluent in Japanese, yet not speak any Japanese in class for pedagogical reasons. Question three asks whether students should use Japanese in the classroom. The remainder of the questions address these primary issues in more detail, particularly question 2, by asking in what circumstances it may be appropriate for the teacher to use Japanese.

The study uses a questionnaire which is identical to the one that Burden used in his study. This in turn was loosely based on Prodromou (1994). The questions may be seen below in Table 1 where the student answers are also tabulated. One important limitation to note about the questionnaire is that students had a choice of only 2 answers to each question－ 'yes' or 'no'. This is, of course, a very simplistic way of looking at each issue, since in many cases, a student will feel that it depends on the circumstances. Many researchers use a five-point Likert scale which allows, students to select from among a range of answers, from 'Strongly Agree' to 'Strongly Disagree', for surveys of this type. However, my own experience and also that of Burden shows that most Japanese students dislike taking extreme postitions and regard the middle option as a safe middle ground (and the one requiring least effort), resulting in a very long series of non-committal answers. I should note that the questionnaire is not intended to be a precise statistical instrument. Apart from the oversimplification intro-

duced by only having two answers, there was no attempt made to ascertain the reliability or validity of the survey. The purpose is merely to determine students' attitudes towards the use of Japanese in the classroom in a general sense and to make practical administrative and teaching recommendations based on these.

The survey was carried out during English classes in the Department of Langauge and Culture by 3 teachers in 10 classes with a total of 350 students. Two of the teachers were native speakers of English and the other was a Japanese teacher of English with native-speaker competence in English. The survey took about 10 minutes for the students to complete including time to write any comments at the end of the paper. Students were encouraged to ask questions (in Japanese or English) about any item which they did not understand.

All the papers were collected and the results of the questionnaire were tabulated to give results for each class individually and also an overall result. The comments were read and reference is made to them in the discussion which follows below. In the study there were a total of 350 students and 10 classs. For the purposes of analysis and discussion, I have divided these into three groups. The two largest classes (almost half the students in the study) and one smaller night class for students who had graduated from technical high schools were at a much lower level than the other classes. These three classes are termed 'Low Level' in the discussion below. Conversely, the two smallest classes were the ones with the highest level and motivation. These classes were elective classes for third and fourth year students and are called 'High Level' for the purposes of this study. The remaining five classes were at a level between these other groups and are called 'Intermediate'. A summary of the results of the questionnaire for these three groups is shown in Table 1. This table gives the numbers of students who answered 'yes' to each question and the corresponding percentages.

Table 1

	Low-Level	Intermediate	Advanced	Total
1. Should the teacher know Japanese?	98	93	78	93
2. Should the teacher use Japanese in class?	72	41	35	55
3. Should the students use Japanese in class?	52	46	25	46
When should the teacher use Japanese in class?				
4. Explaining new words	75	61	20	63
5. Explaining grammar	79	50	18	60
6. Giving instructions	53	34	22	42
7. Talking about culture	42	20	10	29
8. Talking about tests	72	51	45	60
9. Explaining class rules	59	35	22	45
10. Explaining why the students are doing something	54	31	5	39
11. Explaining differences between Japanese grammar & English grammar	79	54	45	64
12. Testing the students	39	34	20	35
13. Checking for understanding	48	39	22	41
14. Relaxing the students	63	42	42	52
15. Creating human contact	44	37	32	40
	100 n=163	100 n=147	100 n=40	100 n=350

Table 2 (Summary of Burden 2000)

	Low-Level	Intermediate	Advanced	Total
1. Should the teacher know Japanese?	89	88	72	87
2. Should the teacher use Japanese in class?	83	63	41	73
3. Should the students use Japanese in class?	75	72	69	73
	n=150	n=64	n=39	n=290

Should the Teacher Know Japanese?

In every class, the students consistently stated a strong preference for teachers who know Japanese. The total number of students who filled in the questionnaire was 350 and 93% of these stated a preference for a teacher who knew Japanese. This figure holds across different classes, different levels and for classes who had a foreign teacher or a Japanese teacher. Although the question did not address the level of Japanese required, this is a very important finding. From low level to high level students, there was little variation in this response, so it is clear that students feel more confident in a learning environment in which the teacher knows their native language.

Even if the students had not expressed this very strong preference for teachers who can speak Japanese, we should note that such teachers have several obvious advantages over those who do not have any knowledge of the Japanese language or culture. Firstly, discpline and administration problems can be easily resolved without severe frustration for both the teacher and student. In addition, there is no need to call in other teachers or office staff to deal with every little query that the teacher does not understand. For example, students often enquire about attendence or registration issues. If teachers understand enough Japanese, they can help the student themselves or direct them to the appropriate office. Secondly, a teacher who knows the students' mother tongue is often able to identify where errors such as inappropriate use of a word or grammatical structure are likely to occur as a result of interference from the mother language. Knowing Japanese allows the teacher to point out the source of the error to the student and thus direct him onto the correct path. Thirdly, a knowledge of Japanese is evidence that the teacher has gone along a similar learning path to the one which the student is now taking. This experience can allow the teacher to empathise with the learner and reduce frustration at the blocks and reversals that occur along any normal learning trajectory. In addition, the student is likely to have a greater respect for a teacher who has gone through the process than for a monoglot. Indeed, it seems almost paradoxical to have a foreign language teacher who doesn't know any foreign language. Fourthly, a knowledge of Japanese can be immensely useful in many small ways in the classroom. Even if the teacher does not generally use Japanese in the classroom, translating a single English word into Japanese for the students can save minutes of awkward explanation which disturb the flow of the lesson. If an individual student or group of students is having problems with an activity, the teacher can reiterate the instructions in Japanese for their benefit without addressing the whole class again. Finally, a knowledge of the Japanese language is a very good indicator of a knowledge of Japanese culture. Few student bodies throughout the world have the same homogenity as Japan. This homogenity leads to certain patterns of learning and teaching which will be most effective with groups of Japanese students. By knowing the Japanese language and its inherent culture, teachers learn to recognize what will be effective for the greatest number of students.

Although I have pointed out the advantages which a knowledge of Japanese can bring to a teacher, I am not suggesting that teachers should use a lot of Japanese in this classroom. The greatest advantages spring from comprehension of Japanese rather than its production. It is important to remember that the main reason native speakers of English are employed in Japanese education is that they can use English in a natural fashion. To use Japanese excessively in the classroom is to deny this very reason and, in my own mind, Japanese should be used very sparingly indeed. Understanding Japanese is a great asset, and a few words of Japanese from the teacher can be helpful, but overuse of Japanese is detrimental to the goal of learning English.

Should Japanese be used?

Moving back to the questionnaire, the answer to the question of whether teachers should use Japanese in the classroom varies according to student level. Overall, 55% of students believe that Japanese should be used by the teacher in some circumstances in the classroom, so 45% of students believe that the teacher should never use Japanese. The highest support is the low-level group. As was expected, lower-level students prefer the teacher to use more Japanese in the classroom. While a huge majority of these students (98%) feel that the teacher should know Japanese, 72%

believe that the teacher should sometimes use this knowledge. This falls to 41% for the intermediate students and again falls to 35% for the advanced students. This trend is clearly related to the language ability of the students and their level of confidence in being able to understand spoken English. In the low level, almost all of the student comments were written in Japanese, while the advanced group wrote them almost exclusively in English. This indicates a further lack of confidence in the low-level classes in their own ability to communicate effectively in English.

Most classes, even low-level ones, are currently held primarily in English, and the student comments add an additional perspective to the results of the questionnaire. In Japanese, many students write comments such as "This class is very easy to understand", "If we really don't understand, the teacher should use Japanese", and "please explain only the test and homework in Japanese". These kinds of comments indicate that low-level students are not having real problems in understanding, but merely want to confirm their understanding of what they think they understand. In other words, the problem is primarily a lack of confidence rather than lack of ability. Perhaps, then, the role of Japanese in low-level classes should be to instill confidence in students by summarizing important points in Japanese after going through them in English. We will return to this discussion of teacher use of Japanese below by addressing specific areas where the students feel that it would be beneficial.

Question three in the questionnaire is the only one which addresses student use of Japanese. Even in the low-level class, 48% of students felt that they should never use Japanese. This rises to 59% in the intermediate level and 75% in the advanced level. This finding is clearly at variance with the actual situation in the classroom where most students will use at least a little Japanese while engaging in pairwork. In some cases, the main role of the teacher turns out to be a watchdog prowling around to see that only English is spoken! Without more questions addressing this issue in detail, there is not enough data to explain this variance satisfactorily, but common sense and our own experience remind us that we are not always able to live up to our own expectations. Indeed, the spirit is strong but the flesh is weak!

What is a reasonable stance to take towards student use of Japanese in the classroom? This clearly depends on the activity in question. For example, a group grammar exercise could be conducted entirely in Japanese if the sole objective was the acquistion of that grammar point. Conversely, a free-ranging conversation practice would be best conducted entirely in English. A teacher who demands 100% English in every activity is denying our students a chance to help each other in their native tongue and risks student fustration directed at the activity or teacher. Usually, a balance can be struck between the use of Japanese and English by allowing students to use an occasional word or phrase in Japanese if it helps to keep the momentum of an English-use activity. In accordance with the results of this questionnaire, the actual percentage of Japanese used will depend on the level of the class, but an experienced teacher who knows Japanese will usually be able to maintain this balance and ensure that a good learning environment is created without an excess of frustration.

One additional point that emerges out of this discussion as an aside is the value of dividing students into different classes by level. The current academic year is the first time that a placement test was used to place students into first-year classes rather than allowing them to choose their own teacher under the traditional registration system. The large variance in responses between classes in different levels validates the use of this placement system. While dividing students into classes accoring to level, it also neatly divides them according to their preferences and learning styles.

When should Japanese be used?

The remaining questions in the questionnaire address the areas of teaching where the students feel that the teacher should use Japanese. Since more than half of the total number of students (and a much higher proportion at higher levels) support the use of Japanese by teachers, it is important for us to distinguish these areas. Despite the different perceptions of students about Japanese usage in the different levels, each group gave the highest priority to the same issues. For example, the four areas which were given the greatest emphasis were explaining new words (Q4), explaining differences between Japanese grammar and

English grammar (Q11), talking about tests (Q8), and relaxing the students (Q14). The actual percentages specified by each group were different, but because of these shared preferences, I will refer to the overall figures of the combined groups in the discussion below.

The highest support for teachers' use of Japanese is for the explanation of new words (63%) and the explanation of the differences between English and Japanese grammar (64%). These answers are in agreement with the discussion above which pointed out that a quick translation of a word or grammar point into Japanese can save considerable time and frustration. The students as well as the teacher recognize that this frustration can be detrimental to language learning. Of course, lengthy Japanese explanations may be counter-productive because they reduce the amount of time spent engaging the target language. Indeed, it is probably true to say that the pedagogical validity of a Japanese explanation decreases as it increases in length. In traditional grammar-translation teacher-centered classes, the teacher spent long periods of time explaining gramamar points or vocabulary. It is now generally recognized that this type of class does not lead to the aquistition of communicative competence, and the standard in modern language teaching has been to create student-centered learning environments where the students have many opportunities to use the target langauge in quasi-communicative or truely communicative situations. The high support for Japanese in these areas should not be interpreted as student support for a return to grammar-translation methodology. This is clear from the many student comments such as : "When I can't find the word that I want to tell, I'd like the teacher to answer my question which is "I don't know how to say ____ in English". Students want to use English for communication and see Japanese explanations of grammar and vocabulary as a quick prop which can faciliate communication without disturbing the flow of this communication. This ties in well with the point made above that students prefer teachers who know Japanese. Without a knowledge of Japanese, this prop is simply not available.

Another item with high support for the use of Japanese was talking about tests (60%). This is not a surprising finding. Tests are an important part of assessment and determining whether a student will get credit or not for a course. Credits are the currency of choice in a university and it is only reasonable to be sure that students know how they will be tested. I have heard numerous horror stories about students who studied hard for a test, only to find that they had misheard the teacher instructions and studied the wrong items. If there is any doubt that students may not understand their reponsibilities exactly, then we are under an obligation to use Japanese to make the matter clear.

A rather surprising finding was the high support for the use of Japanese in relaxing students (52%). Do students feel anxiety in an all-English environment? Tsui has written for many years on how student anxiety can be detrimental to the language learning process (e.g., Tsui 1996). She has pointed out that a high-tension classroom can make students afraid to speak out, especially if there is a perception that an incorrect response will be harshly judged by the teacher. In the modern communicative classroom, it is clearly important that we encourage students to speak out and get plenty of practice in using the foreign language without fear of censure. As has been repeatedly pointed out by teachers, mistakes are a neccessary element in developing language competence. Bearing this and the students' answers in mind, perhaps we should conciously use Japanese at times to relax the students. One possible practical approach is to use a few words of Japanese at times when it is clear that students are entering an anxiety phase. For example, if a teacher asks a student a question and the student is getting flustered because they do not know the answer, a few words of Japanese to help the student or simply alleviate the tension may be useful. Foreign teachers may have the somewhat disturbing, but nonetheless useful experience that anything they say in Japanese can be found to be amusing! Indeed, imperfect Japanese may also have the positive result of conveying to the students the fact that even imperfect foreign language ability can be a highly useful communicative tool.

It is interesting to examine which areas the students felt that Japanese was not to be used. Culture (29%) is the lowest figure and this perhaps reflects the growing awareness of students that language and culture are strongly interrelated and that culture

should be explained in English to the greatest possible degree. Establishing human contact (40%) was also a low figure indicating that students get to know their teacher sufficently through the medium of the foreign language and that they do not need to use Japanese exclusively to have meaningful communication. Checking understanding (41%) and giving instuctions (42%) were also quite low. I have often heard non-native teachers express concern that the students would not understand the purpose of activities or how to carry them out if the instructions were not given in Japanese. But these relatively low figures show that students do not in general have problems with understanding classroom instructions in English and lend support to the use of English in carrying out classroom activities, even by non-native speakers.

As stated above, this study was a replication of one carried out by Burden. Unlike Nagoya Institute of Technology where all the students are majoring in technical subjects, his study included a large proportion of students majoring in English, law, and comparative culture. Despite this difference, the results of the current study and Burden's study are very similar. The results of the first three questions are summarized in Table 2. As in the current study, there is very high support for teacher knowledge of Japanese. The level of support for using this Japanese declines as the level of the class rises, just as in the current study. Furthermore, the highest support for Q4-15 was for the same four areas discussed above, i.e., explaining new words, talking about tests, explaining differences between English and Japanese grammar, and relaxing the students. This remarkable similarity implies that these preferences may be relatively uniform among all Japanese students.

Conclusions

Having established that students in NIT and other technical colleges are likely to be more comfortable with teachers who understand their own language, what practical conclusions can we draw? Indeed, should we not question whether the students' preference may actually mitigate against language learning by preventing them from facing the ambiguity which is an essential part of language learning? Indeed, we should address this issue, but as teachers of large classes with one predominant preference, we must take this into account at both the teaching and administrative level. I can identify five solid conclusions that emerge from this study.

1) Teachers should have a knowledge of Japanese language and culture.
2) Classes should continue to be divided by level to take account of the different preferences between low-level and high-level learners.
3) The teacher should use Japanese more in lower-level classes than higher-level ones.
4) Japanese should be spoken only after English has been used and primarily to instill confidence in students that they have understood what the teacher said.
5) Japanese should normally be used only in the four areas of explaining new words, talking about tests, explaining differences between English and Japanese grammar, and relaxing the students. Even this usage should be kept as short as possible.

References

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