The Teacher's Use of the Students' Mother Tongue in an English Conversation Course

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英会話の授業で教員が学生の母国語を使用することについて

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Abstract

In the field of language education, there are arguments for and against using the mother tongue of students in a monolingual class. There are advantages to strictly using only English in English language class. However, there are also advantages to be considered in the occasional use of the students' mother tongue when seen as a resource. It could be said that this view takes the needs of the students into account. What exactly do English conversation students want in this regard? Is this affected by students' perceptions concerning the nationality of the teacher? Would using both English and the students' mother tongue answer the needs of the students?

In order to investigate this, a survey of students' opinions on the use of their mother tongue by native speaker English ("foreign") teachers and non-native (specifically Japanese) teachers was conducted. It was found that among the students enrolled in English II at Niigata Seiryo University, and English Conversation I in the Department of International Cultural Studies of Niigata Seiryo Women's Junior College, on average 91% said they wanted their teacher to understand Japanese. If the teacher were foreign, an average of 81% wanted him or her to use Japanese in class when necessary, and if the teacher were Japanese, the ratio was 92%.

Key Words

language education, English conversation, mother tongue, Japanese learner, needs

和文要旨

語学教育の分野では、学生の母国語が統一されている場合に授業の中で学生の母国語を使用することについて議論となるところである。英語の授業で、英語のみを使用することはさまざまな利点がある。しかし、英語のみを使用するだけでなく、学生に共通している母国語を必要な時に使用することにも利点があると考えた。それは、学生のニーズに添った英語学習につながるのではないかということである。では、英会話の授業で実際に学生はどのようなことを望んでいるのだろうか。学生の望んでいることは、教員の国籍に左右されるのだろうか。英語と学生の母国語をどちらも使用することは、果たして学生のニーズに添っているのだろうか。

そのことを明確にするために、英会話科目の中で英語を母国語とする教員と日本人教員が学生の母国語を使用することに関する意見を調査した。新潟青陵大学の英語IIを受講している学生と新潟青陵女子短期大学の英会話Iを受講している国際文化学科の学生を対象に調査した結果、平均91%の学生が教員は日本語を理解した方がよいと答え、教員が外国人なら平均81%、日本人なら平均92%の学生が必要に応じて日本語を使用してほしいと答えた。

キーワード

語学教育、英会話、母国語、日本人学習者、ニーズ

Introduction

I have often encountered the method or policy which holds that English conversation classes must be conducted strictly in English. This view often holds that to use the students' mother tongue (MT) to help explain vocabulary, check for understanding, or help students having difficulty expressing themselves in English is to be frowned upon and avoided, and is perhaps even taboo. However, I have received a different impression from many students, especially false beginners and intermediate level students, indicating that they would find occasional help in their mother tongue to be useful and expedient, especially when faced with a difficult or complicated conversation pair work task, or when their English ability fails them in their desire to express an opinion in English that they have formulated clearly in Japanese. It seemed to me that if the students were to share the same MT and the teacher were fluent in it as well, the MT might be a useful teaching aid. However, I must emphasize that I am referring to occasional careful use of the MT to help students, not use of it to an extent that would interfere with the purpose of the course.

Atkinson (1993, p. 13) calls into question the 'ideal' of one hundred percent direct method in monolingual classes, stating that the L1 can be very useful in moderation. Rivers (1981, p. 35) describes the "modified direct method," which is a compromise in which the students' MT is sometimes used when giving functional grammar explanations, explaining vocabulary, or when checking comprehension.

I became aware of a study conducted by Burden (2000) which surveyed Japanese university students' opinions on whether they thought it was important for their teacher to understand their MT, and when they thought it was appropriate for the teacher to use the students' MT in English conversation class. I decided to conduct a similar survey with students here to see what sort of feedback I would receive.

In addition, I was curious about a subject that Burden did not touch upon. The teachers involved in Burden's survey were all native speakers of English. I wondered if my students' perceptions of their language learning needs differed depending on whether the teacher was a native or a non-native speaker of English. My hypothesis was that since the goal of English conversation class was to practice spoken English, preconceptions about the nationality of the teacher would not be a significant factor.

Administering the Questionnaire

A questionnaire was prepared using the fifteen questions used by Burden (2000), but translated into Japanese in order to minimize the chance that the questions might be misunderstood. This primary questionnaire is provided in appendix 1.

The questionnaires were administered by four English teachers, three native speakers of English and one Japanese, during the second semester of 2002 to the students of English II (an English conversation class given at Niigata Seiryo University, Department of Nursing and Department of Social Welfare and Psychology; total 198 students responding) and English Conversation I (Niigata Seiryo Women's Junior College, Department of International Studies; 61 students responding). All of

the junior college students and a great majority of the university students were first year students. Students were given approximately 10 minutes to complete the questionnaire during class.

After the results were tabulated, some of the results from the junior college students seemed very difficult to interpret without further investigation. Therefore, a secondary questionnaire, also in Japanese, was prepared for the junior college students, asking them to provide insight into why they answered as they did. Students were again given about 10 minutes to respond. The secondary questionnaire is provided in appendix 2.

The answers were totaled and converted to a percentage. For any given question, 9% of the students did not respond on average. Some students seem to have misunderstood the supposition "if the teacher were Japanese (or foreign)" to mean that they should only answer the questions that matched the nationality of their actual teacher. Some simply skipped over questions. Non-responses were not included in the total when calculating the percentages of yes and no answers, so neither of these factors should pose a problem.

The answers given by Seiryo students are compared with Burden's pre-intermediate group, because he defines that group as comprised of first year students with a variety of majors, with 41% majoring in English (Burden, 2000, p. 6). Twenty four percent of the Seiryo students (all of the junior college students) are specializing in English for at least the first year of their studies.

Should the Teacher and Students Use the Mother Tongue in English Class?

First, students were asked in general about the use of the MT in their English class in addition to English. The percentages in table 1 show the ratio of students who replied "yes" for the two possibilities presented: if the teacher were a foreigner (If F) and if the teacher were Japanese (If J). Burden's questionnaire was given only by non-Japanese teachers, and since he makes no mention of considering English teachers of Japanese nationality in his study, I am assuming that his results are If F. Question 1 was not asked concerning Japanese teachers because it would not have been meaningful.

Table 1. Should the Teacher or Students Use the Mother Tongue in Class?

	NSU	NSU & NSWJC		NSU NSW		JC	Burden's		
	NSW						Pre-Int.		
	n=25	n=259		n=198		n=198			<i>n</i> = 150
	If F	If J	If F	If J	If F	If J	(If F)		
1. The teacher should know the students' MT.	91%	N/A	94%	N/A	82%	N/A	89%		
2. The teacher should use the students' MT in class.	81%	92%	83%	92%	72%	90%	83%		
3. The students should use their MT in class.	72%	83%	75%	82%	63%	87%	75%		

A clear majority of students thought that understanding and using the MT was desirable. The Seiryo students' answers were very similar to those of Burden's pre-intermediate group, with the exception of the junior college students' answers to 2 and 3, which were much lower regarding foreign teachers. However, there was little variation concerning Japanese teachers, which were expected to use the MT much more often than foreign teachers, with 11% more yes responses to questions 2 and 3 by the

university and junior college students combined.

As for the other twelve survey questions which follow, on average the university students responded yes 74% of the time when asked if a Japanese teacher should use the MT in English class for a specific purpose, versus an average of 65% if the teacher were foreign, a difference of only 9%. However, the junior college students responded yes 82% and 59% of the time respectively, indicating a large gap of 23% in their perceptions. It would appear that my hypothesis was not correct. Since their gap in expectations was the most pronounced, the junior college students were asked to explain why in the secondary questionnaire.

Some said that if a Japanese teacher uses the MT in English class, students may become too dependent, and will resign themselves to using Japanese in class. However, if a foreign teacher uses less Japanese, they may become tense and keyed up and try to use English more often. It is not clear why they did not think this would be an equally valid point if made irrespective of the teacher's nationality, even though the question that was posed to them specifically reminded them that the purpose of the course is the same regardless of whether or not the teacher is a native.

Another view that emphasized a dependency on the Japanese teacher's use of the MT but in a positive light was that if a Japanese teacher uses the MT in English conversation class, it would be easier for the teacher and students to communicate, but if a foreign teacher used the MT, there would be many misunderstandings, generalizing that foreign teachers' Japanese ability is usually poor. Finally, some said that they expect to be able to learn correct pronunciation from the native teacher's English rather than the non-native teacher's, assuming that there is a marked difference that most of them will be able to discern easily. These answers also seemed to infer that the students were talking about very frequent use of the MT.

A common answer, which did not give much insight except to suggest students were expressing a preconceived notion, was "simply because the teacher is Japanese (or foreign)." Some attitudes expressed in the secondary survey, like this one, seemed to reject the contributions and capabilities of Japanese English teachers, as well as over generalize about foreign teachers. Non-native language teachers who teach in the target language give students valuable input and help to increase the number of hours that students are exposed to spoken English. Unless a student's English proficiency level is superior to the non-native or even native teacher's level, the student can learn from the teacher's spoken English.

When Should the Teacher Use the Students' MT in English Class?

Next, the students were asked in what situations they would like their teacher to make use of the Japanese language in addition to English. These questions, with the exception of number 6 (due to an unfortunate oversight on my part), were also asked separately concerning foreign and Japanese English teachers. While the numbering is the same, the questions are presented here in an order different from that of Burden (2000) in order to group and compare questions about similar situations where Japanese might also be used in the English class.

Questions about the Content of the Class

The first group, shown in table 2, is composed of those questions which asked about situations where the teacher is giving instruction in the content of the course: language and culture.

Table 2. When Should the Teacher Use the Students' MT in Class? (Content-Related)

	NSU	NSWJC		NSU n=198		JC	Burden's
	NSW						Pre-Int.
	n=259						<i>n</i> =150
	If F	If J	lf F	lf J	If F	lfJ	(If F)
4. Explaining new words	54%	69%	54%	65%	52%	80%	48%
5. Explaining grammar	77%	89%	82%	89%	63%	91%	42%
7. Talking about culture	44%	62%	43%	57%	47%	75%	27%
11. Explaining differences between MT and English	53%	68%	52%	62%	57%	85%	56%
Average Yes %	57%	72%	58%	68%	55%	83%	43%

On average, the percentage of Seiryo students responding affirmatively was 14% higher than the Burden group. Japanese teachers were expected to use the MT more than foreign teachers by an average of 15% of the Seiryo students. Over 50% of Seiryo students asked for the MT to be used in every case except when talking about culture, whereas with Burden's group, it was only when explaining language differences that over 50% responded yes.

The largest gap between the Seiryo students and Burden's was concerning question 5, where 35% more Seiryo students responded that they would like foreign teachers to use the MT when explaining English grammar. Perhaps this is due to the students' experiences in high school that grammar is something that is taught explicitly in the mother tongue, not in the target language.

When asked about English vocabulary, 23% less Seiryo students wanted foreign teachers to sometimes use Japanese than when grammar is concerned. The largest differences between expectations for foreign and Japanese teachers were shown by the junior college students, with a difference of 28% for each of the three questions respectively. The junior college students were asked about this using the secondary questionnaire.

When asked about their differing attitudes toward the use of their MT by foreign and Japanese teachers when talking about culture, some students responded that since language is also culture, if one is going to talk about the culture of English-speaking countries, it is most appropriate for to do so in English. Similarly, some said that it is easier to communicate English culture through English, because English and Japanese nuances are different. Students recognize the value of using English for a communicative task such as speaking on culture, and the lower than usual percentage of those wanting a Japanese teacher of English to use more Japanese in this communicative situation is encouraging.

However, it would be ideal if more of the students were able to pick up on the subtle differences in meaning some referred to in their responses, in addition to knowing the vocabulary and understanding the grammar necessary to listen to a short, spontaneous monologue on culture in English. One practical, but less spontaneous way to meet these expectations for pre-intermediate level students would be for the teacher to prepare a list of vocabulary with definitions and a list of grammatical expressions and hand it out before speaking about culture, while being careful to not stray far from that material when speaking.

When asked about their differences in opinion concerning native English speaker and Japanese teachers sometimes using the students' MT to aid in teaching vocabulary and grammar, some students wrote that when Japanese teachers use English, they are difficult to understand, and when foreign teachers use Japanese, they too are difficult to understand. They said that because native English is easier to understand than non-native, they wanted foreign teachers to explain in English and Japanese teachers to explain in Japanese.

Although it may be ideal to try to explain all English vocabulary using English synonyms and avoid using Japanese at all costs, it has been my experience that many of my students do not have the vocabulary to understand those English synonyms either, and will instead give up on understanding the problem word rather than continue drawing attention to themselves for a long negotiation of meaning. I can then either tell them the meaning in Japanese, or ask them to look it up in their dictionary, which will also give them a Japanese definition because students prefer bilingual dictionaries. With the students of the level of English proficiency that I usually see, it is my experience that students will not use a monolingual English dictionary even when it is required to have one. Students say that either the definitions are too difficult for them to understand, or are easy but that level of dictionary does not define enough words to be useful. This gives the impression that most of the students prefer to be given Japanese definitions, contrary to what they have indicated on the questionnaire.

Questions about Giving Directions

The next group concerns questions about situations where the teacher is giving directions. Burden's question 6 was not clear about when the instructions are given, so it was assumed that this mainly referred to explaining how to do the pair and group conversation activities common in conversation classes. Question 7 also seemed vague, and for this study was assumed to refer to instructions for answering questions on written examinations.

	NSU	NSU &			NSWJC		Burden's	
	NSW	NSWJC					Pre-Int.	
	n=259	n=259		<i>n</i> =198			n=:150	
	lf F	lf J	If F	lf J	If F	IfJ	(If F)	
6. Giving instructions	79%	N/A	81%	N/A	72%	N/A	34%	
12. Testing the students	81%	88%	84%	88%	72%	87%	19%	
13. Checking for understanding	42%	57%	44%	57%	37%	56%	43%	
Average Yes %	67%	73%	70%	73%	60%	72%	32%	

Table 3. When Should the Teacher Use the Students' MT in Class? (Directive)

The average percentage of Seiryo students who responded yes was more than twice that of Burden's group. This large difference might be due to a difference in my interpretations of questions 6 and 12 versus Burden's. However, the differences between the expectations for foreign and Japanese teachers were relatively small. The junior college students answered yes somewhat less often than the university students concerning foreign teachers.

A majority of Seiryo students wanted their teacher to also use Japanese when giving instructions or directions, with the exception of question 13, checking for understanding, which seems counterintuitive.

In order to investigate this, as a "bonus question" I asked students participating in this survey about what they do when they do not understand the teacher. In response, 81% of all Seiryo first year students said they would ask another student for clarification instead of asking the teacher, confirming what I have observed in class. When students ask each other, they are asking in Japanese. Also, even if there is a specific call for questions, often none are asked, and students may instead act as if "Do you have any questions?" really means "Next page, please," or "Class dismissed," regardless of how often or how patiently they are given the opportunity, or whether they are allowed to ask questions in Japanese. The same is often true when students are asked "Do you understand?" in English as a group. There is more often than not no response one way or another at all, not even a nod. Therefore, before giving the survey I had hypothesized that a majority of students would want the teacher to actively confirm in Japanese whether they have understood everything before moving on. The junior college students gave the least number of yes responses and showed the largest gap in expectations for foreign and Japanese teachers, so they were asked why.

Most of the students said that they hardly ever ask the teacher questions in any class, not just English class. They prefer to ask another student because they feel it is easier to do so, especially if it concerns checking their comprehension on one or two points. Therefore, they said, it makes no difference what language the teacher uses to check for understanding, because the students do not expect the teacher to check at all. Other students said they did not know what to say or how to ask questions in English, or they felt insecure about doing so.

Some might explain this attitude as being a matter of Japanese culture that should be accepted as is

(such as Anderson 1993), but others, such as some of my Japanese colleagues, and some of the students' upperclassmen who say that they participate in class much more now, would say it shows a need for the freshmen to move away from the way they were conditioned to behave in high school and mature more as college students.

Such a passive attitude lacking in initiative makes it hard for the teacher to obtain immediate feedback about how well the students understand and whether they are ready to proceed. This could be problematic in any course, but is especially troubling in a communicative foreign language course where not only the message but also the medium may confuse the students, and where it is very possible that asking another confused student to clarify something like how to do a practice task will only compound misunderstandings and create frustration. Educating the students to actively take more responsibility for their own studies seems appropriate.

Questions about Administering the Class

The next group of questions concerns situations where the teacher is administering the class. Question 8 was assumed to refer to explaining what will be on the test, and question 9 was assumed to include the syllabus for the course.

Table 4. When Should the Teacher Use the Students' MT in Class? (Administrative)

	NSWJC		NSU		NSWJC		Burden's
							Pre·Int.
			<i>n</i> =198		n=61		n=150
	If F	If J	If F	lf J	If F	иJ	(If F)
8. Talking about tests	82%	87%	87%	89%	67%	80%	59%
9. Explaining class rules	62%	78%	65%	77%	56%	82%	29%
10. Explaining the reason for doing an activity	69%	80%	71%	79%	62%	82%	27%
Average Yes %	71%	82%	74%	82%	62%	81%	38%

Again, the average percentage of Seiryo students answering yes was more than double that of Burden's group.

The junior college students were less likely to answer yes concerning foreign teachers. The average difference between expectations for foreign and Japanese teachers was 11%, with the smallest difference (only 2%) being with university students' expectations concerning explaining tests. A straightforward interpretation of this would be that students want to be sure there are no ambiguities where their grade is concerned, and this is especially evident about tests. I included course syllabi in question 9, whereas Burden asked the question as is, and that may explain the different answer I received. As for question 10, Burden (2000, p. 8) thought his students might not want such explanations at all.

Questions about Interpersonal Interaction with the Teacher

The last group of questions concerns interpersonal relations between the teacher and the students.

	NSU	NSU &			NSWJC		Burden's
	NSW	NSWJC					Pre-Int.
	n=259	n=259		08 n=0			<i>n</i> =150
	If F	IfJ	If F	If J	lf F	If J	(If F)
14. Relaxing the students	52%	67%	51%	62%	57%	82%	59%
15. Creating human contact	58%	72%	57%	67%	62%	87%	41%
Average Yes %	55%	70%	54%	65%	60%	85%	50%

Table 5. When Should the Teacher Use the Students' MT in Class? (Interpersonal)

The Seiryo students answered yes only somewhat more often than Burden's pre-intermediate group. In contrast to all the other question groups where the junior college students wanted less use of the MT than the university students did, the junior college students wanted more personal interaction with their English teachers in Japanese, especially with Japanese teachers (20% more) but to a smaller degree with foreign teachers (5% more). Even Burden's group was more likely to answer yes in this category. The results for the two questions were all similar by about 10%, except when comparing Seiryo students' expectations about foreign teachers to Japanese teachers, where there was an average difference of 15%. Burden's (2000, p. 8) interpretation that "when deemed necessary, students turn to the language they are most comfortable with, thus serving their basic psychological needs" may be the best explanation.

Conclusion

As a result of conducting this survey. I became aware that most of the students would like the teacher to use their MT in class when it would facilitate or supplement the learning of English. However, students' opinions valuing the opportunity to listen to and use spoken English showed they did not want the usage of Japanese to overshadow English. This appears to be similar to Burden's (2000, p. 10) findings that "students want the teacher to use the target language exclusively when it is being used in communication, but expect the teacher to have a knowledge of, and an ability to use MT when it is appropriate to explain the usage of English."

One example of this that comes to mind is something more similar to the community language learning method than the direct method of "English only." Many students want to participate in English discussions and conversations but lack the vocabulary or grammar knowledge and are overwhelmed. They have great difficulty composing sentences that express in English what it is they want to say. If the teacher were able to interpret the student's MT utterance into the target language for him or her to repeat, that would help the student to overcome the limitations of his or her interlanguage and participate in a task that might be too difficult and discouraging for the student alone.

The majority of the students also seemed to want their MT used more often when the teacher is administering the class, and as backup to ensure understanding when the teacher is giving instructions for conversation practice tasks. They also seemed to indicate that directions on

examinations should be in the MT. Thus they indicated a need for the teacher to use the MT as insurance that students, when being evaluated for a grade, are proceeding correctly according to instructions.

Investigating students' preferences has shown a sizeable difference in attitude concerning MT usage by Japanese and non-Japanese English teachers. Further research into the reasons for this is necessary in order to confirm whether students are basing their attitudes on practical considerations, or instead upon preconceptions and stereotypes about nationality and native speakers.

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Appendix 1. Primary Survey

英語 II・英会話 I で教員が日本語を使う事についての質問に答えてください。

1. 英語の教員は日本語も理解できた方がいい。	はい	いいえ
2. 日本人の教員は授業で日本語も使った方がいい。	時々使ってもいい	全く使わない方がいい
2. 外国人の教員は授業で日本語も使った方がいい。	時々使ってもいい	全く使わない方がいい
3. 日本人の教員なら学生は日本語を使ってもいい。	時々使ってもいい	全く使わない方がいい
3. 外国人の教員なら学生は日本語を使ってもいい。	時々使ってもいい	全く使わない方がいい

実際に受けている授業の担当教員の国籍とは関係なく

どんな時教員に日本語も使ってほしいですか?

教員が日本人の場合

教員が外国人の場合

4. 英単語を説明する。	使う	使わない	使う	使わない
5. 英文法を説明する。	使う	使わない	使う	使わない
7. 英語圏の文化について説明する。	使う	使わない	使う	使わない
8. 試験範囲や問題形式について説明する。	使う	使わない	使う	使わない
9. 授業のルールやシラバスを説明する。	使う	使わない	使う	使わない
10. 課題の必要性や意義を説明する。	使う	使わない	使う	使わない
11. 日本語と英語の違いについて説明する。	使う	使わない	使う	使わない
12. 試験時に問題文など解答の仕方を指示する。	使う	使わない	使う	使わない
13. 学生が理解しているかどうかを確かめる。	使う	使わない	使う	使わない
14. 緊張感をほぐす。	使う	使わない	使う	使わない
15. 学生との人間関係を深める。	使う	使わない	使う	使わない

教員が会話の演習などのやり方を英語で説明した時、あなたが分からなかったら…

	その場で教員に質問する。	教員に質問しないで隣の学生に聞く。
- 1		

6. 教員は会話の演習などのやり方を…

英語のみで説明するべきだ。	英語と日本語の両方で説明するべきだ。	日本語のみで説明するべきだ。						
この話題についてご意見、ご感想があったら自由に書いてください。								
		ご協力ありがとうございました。						

Appendix 2. Secondary Survey

英会話 I で教員が日本語を使う事についてのアンケートを行い、その結果から出たいくつかの疑問についてもう一度アンケートにご協力いただきたいと思います。

- 1. 同じ英会話Iの授業でも、教員がもしも日本人の場合での各質問に対して、「日本語を使った方がいい」と答えた学生は平均82%と非常に多いのに対し、教員がもしも外国人だった場合でそう答えた学生は平均59%だけでした。「英語を話す」ことが目的である英会話の授業なのですが、日本人の教員の場合と外国人の教員の場合の結果に大きな差が出るのはなぜだと思いますか?
- 2. 先日のアンケート結果の大部分は日本人教員、外国人教員の間に差はあったにしても、「日本語を使った方がいい」と答えた学生が多かったです。しかし、その中で、「英語圏の文化について説明する場合に日本語を使った方がいい」という質問に、外国人教員では「いいえ」と答えた学生が 53%でした。外国人の教員の場合に「はい」と答えた学生より「いいえ」と答えた学生が多かったのはなぜだと思いますか?
- 3. 英単語・英文法を説明する場合、日本語で説明した方が理解しやすいのではないかと期待するところでありましたが、結果では日本人教員なら英単語80%・英文法91%、外国人教員なら英単語52%・英文法63%の学生が日本語を使った方がいいと答えました。日本人の教員の場合と外国人の教員の場合の結果に大きな差が出るのはなぜだと思いますか?
- 4. 81%の学生が「教員が会話の演習などのやり方を英語で説明した時、分からなかったら教員に質問しないで隣の学生に聞く」と答えました。しかし、「教員は学生が理解しているかどうかを確かめる時に日本語を使った方がいい」という質問に「はい」と答えた学生が、日本人教員なら 56%、外国人教員なら 37%と少なかったのはなぜだと思いますか?