L1 Use in the L2 Classroom: A University Instructor's Perceptions of His Language Choices

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Abstract

First language (L1) use in English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms has been researched for over three decades. Scholars have studied classroom L1 use from different perspectives, for example, the functions of teachers' L1 use (Sert, 2005; Forman, 2016) and its pedagogical effects (Lee & Macaro, 2013; Lee & Levine, 2020). Although English-only policies have been questioned in many countries, in Japan the Ministry of Education recommends that English should be taught through English. As Hawkins (2015) notes, this has led to a belief in Japan that L1 use should be minimized or avoided in EFL classrooms. Although research regarding the quantity and functions of classroom L1 use has gained more attention, there are few studies that have investigated teachers' perspectives on their own L1 use (e.g., Polio & Duff, 1994; Hobbs et al., 2009). This paper reports on the findings from a qualitative study which explores how and why a university instructor used students' L1 in his classroom. Data from semi-structured interviews, stimulated recall interviews, and classroom observations are analyzed using a phenomenological approach. The paper focuses on one participant, an English-speaking EFL instructor in a Japanese university, and discusses his use of the students' L1 with his understanding of his language choices. The findings show that the instructor's L1 use is likely associated to sociopragmatics and that his language choice is a multifaced and dynamic phenomenon as he responds to the communication needs of his students while managing his classes.

Keywords: L1 Use, Language Choice, Teacher Perception, EFL, Japanese

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Introduction

There has been an ongoing debate regarding the L1 use in the second language (L2) classrooms for over three decades, and researchers such as Cook (2001) have argued for inclusion of L1 in teaching and learning L2 in language classroom settings. In recent years, there has been a shift to L1 inclusion in teaching L2 in many countries and learning contexts; however, a negative connotation about the L1 use in language teaching contexts remains (Hawkins, 2015) in Japan, and monolingual approach is preferred in English teaching contexts. L1 use is often discussed with how much is used and in relation to avoidance or minimization, and the discussions tend to be related to how much L1 is used by teachers.

However, as Borg and Sanchez (2020) note, teachers are "thoughtful, active decision-makers who have a significant influence on what happens in the classroom" (p.16). Indeed, language instructors are often required to make spur of the moment decisions as they respond to classroom events and students' reactions. Although what English as a foreign language instructors believe and perceive about their language choices plays a large part in their classroom teaching practices, there is a dearth of research that investigates how and why they use the student L1 in their classrooms in EFL contexts, especially at the tertiary level. This paper reports on an instructor's perceptions of his language use and choices in a Japanese university EFL classroom. The data and participant presented in this paper is drawn from one of the participants from a larger study that I conducted (Harwood, 2020). It considers the participant's sociopragmatic aspects of language choice and use. The first language refers to students' primary language, Japanese, and the instructor's first language is English in this paper.

Context and background

In Japan, English has been learned in the context where English language was not directly linked with the periods of colonization but learned in a foreign language context especially for cultural and economic growth. , The Japanese Ministry of Education, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) developed the English education reform plan (MEXT, 2014) which are intended as a response to the globalized economy and society. The government and universities put considerable effort into English education from secondary to higher education. MEXT recommends that, in principle, English should be taught through English (MEXT, 2014) in secondary and upper secondary schools; this is partly because Japan is an EFL context where most students have limited exposure to English outside the classroom. At the tertiary level, MEXT's report shows that 99% of Japanese universities (730 out of 736 universities shown in the survey) offer English language classes, and approximately 40% of the universities offer English classes in English (MEXT, 2019; 2021). Universities offer various English programs to prepare Japanese students for the globalized world (Yonezawa & Shimmi, 2017), and the government and universities direct many resources to English education in Japan.

Literature review

L1 use in foreign language classrooms has been extensively researched from various aspects and contexts. Researchers have focused on quantity (Duff & Polio, 1990; Lo, 2014), effectiveness of L1 use to teaching and learning the L2 (Lee & Levine, 2020; , Macaro et al., 2014; Rolin-Ianziti and Brownlie, 2002; Tian & Macaro, 2012; Viakinnou-Brinson et al. 2012; Zhang & Graham, 2020), and functional analysis of codeswitching (Sert, 2005;

Cahyani et al., 2018; Forman, 2016). Studies have reported positive findings, and generally there is consensus among the researchers that students benefit from their L1 use, and researchers have sought judicious use of learner's L1.

While many studies related to L1 use has focused on the frequency of L1 used in the classrooms and its effects on or efficacy in teaching and learning the L2, other studies have investigated instructors' perceptions of the L1 use and how L1 and L2 were used (Polio & Duff, 1994); self-evaluated how the instructor actually used L1 and identified motivations and reasons underlying her own L1 use (Edstrom, 2006); and explored the culture of learning in relation to codeswitching and instructor's language use (Hobbs et al. 2009). Several studies have explored instructors' attitudes and motivation for codeswitching and language choices (Canh & Hamied, 2014; Humphries & Stroupe, 2014; Littlewood and Yu, 2010). Other scholars have analyzed classroom discourse to better understand code choice (Levine, 2011) and the L1 impact on social interactions (Sert, 2015) in the language classrooms. Those studies have reported on social, cultural, and pragmatic factors, and how contexts can also influence and determine the instructors' language choices (Gallagher, 2020).

Methodology

The current study employs a qualitative study approach to understand how an instructor makes sense of his use of the student L1 and consider the influences on his language choices. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). In IPA studies, the researcher's analytic attention is placed on the participants' attempts to make sense of their experiences and the participants' interpretations of the phenomenon in inquiry (Smith et al., 2009; 2022). The focus of the study results is drawn from how the researcher makes sense of how the participant makes sense of that experience. Following the IPA principle, the current study is committed to understanding the participant's point of view and interpretation of his meaning-making.

Data collection

The data were collected from two 90-minute classroom observations and two one-hour semi-structured interviews. A stimulated recall interview method was also incorporated to allow the participant to provide interpretations of his own actions and enable me to elicit the thought processes in the instructor's actions (see Friedman, 2012). The two classroom observations and interviews were audio-recorded. I was present in the classroom throughout each 90-minute class and kept field notes. The language used in the interviews was the participant's L1, English. I transcribed the interview data and classroom discourse that involved the participant's use of Japanese and English, and the transcripts from the classroom observations were used in a 50-minute stimulated recall interview with the participant. The data were analyzed to understand the participant's point of view by following IPA principles: phenomenological; double hermeneutic; and idiographic.

Participant and Setting

The study was conducted in a private Japanese university. The study participant, George (pseudonym) is a fulltime faculty member at the university. He is an American citizen and English speaker who has over 25 years of experience in teaching tertiary level English in Japan as well as several years' experience teaching in North and South America in English as a second language contexts. George is a highly proficient Japanese speaker and is competent

in several other languages. He was selected for the study because he is an experienced instructor who is highly proficient in Japanese (the student L1) and is not constrained in his language use in L1 and L2 in the classroom.

The classes observed focus on speaking skills and are part of a compulsory English course for general academic purposes for first year undergraduate students. At the university, English is taught as a required subject to all students regardless of their major at the university. The English program is designed to support first-year undergraduate students as they transition from the English that they learned at high-school to be able to use English for academic purposes at university. The class comprised of 22 non-English major students, and their first language is Japanese. Their English proficiency level is A1 to A2 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

Findings and Discussion

George's Aim in this Class

One of George's concerns is that his students are freshmen and their major is not English. He observes that most of his students are often reluctant to speak English and do not feel comfortable using English because they did not have many opportunities to communicate only in English at high school. In addition, he explained that he believes those students feel frustrated or embarrassed as they are streamed by their English proficiency and assigned to the class based on their TOEIC® scores. To mitigate the difficulties that his students may face and to ease their frustration, George aims to create a comfortable classroom atmosphere for his students and facilitate their smooth transition to university. George explained that he does not see himself as a person who dispenses knowledge about the target language to the students, but he positions himself as a facilitator in the class.

George's Attitudes Towards his Use of the Student L1

George stated that although he uses English to teach English, he is strictly against English-only classroom environment. He notes that he codeswitches with his family, friends, and colleagues in order to better communicate and convey culturally more appropriate meanings in the given contexts. He acknowledges that codeswitching is a normal behavior if a speaker and a hearer share the same languages. He does not separate classroom settings from everyday settings in terms of his language use, and he takes a natural approach to his teaching in terms of his language use. He believes that it would make the class quieter and less engaged if he kept his instructional language in English only.

In the first interview, which was conducted before the classroom observations, George associated his use of the student L1 with the students' proficiency level. George explained that he uses the student L1 to explain vocabulary and clarify task instructions. He noted that some tasks and activities are complicated for his students to understand, and that he provides explanations in Japanese to support students when necessary. He noted that he thinks the use of the student L1 saves time, and that it also helps his students to follow him and the lesson if their proficiency in the L2 is limited.

Subsequent interviews and classroom observations as well as the stimulated recall shed further light on George's sense making regarding his language choices. His concerns about cultural and social appropriateness or sociopragmatic aspects of language use emerged.

Sociopragmatics connects pragmatic meaning with a degree of social distance between the interlocutors, social rules in the language or speech community, and accepted behaviours and discourse practices (Thomas, 1985). Below, George's perceptions of his language choice are discussed using the excerpts from the classroom observation.

George's Language Use and his Perceptions about his Language Choices

Three excerpts in the following section illustrate George's language use and choices in relation to sociopragmatics. His language choices are connected to: (a) to make lighter atmosphere (make students laugh); (b) to lower student anxiety; (c) to help to build rapport; (d) to show a little more respect; and (e) to use words which are culturally more relevant (no equivalent words in English to fit in the Japanese context).

The incident shown in Excerpt 1 was when the class was working on a dictation activity using the textbook. The class was about to work on dictation activities with the audio recording. George gave instructions to his students, and they had to fill gaps in the textbook as they listened to the two people talking. He was going to play the audio recording.

Excerpt 1: いきます *(Ikimasu)*

1. T: Are you ready (for the dictation exercise)?
2. S: [No response - Students talking to each other]
3. T: Please try to answer the questions. I will pause it (the audio recording) for you.
        [Students still talking to each other]
4. T: いきます。 Ready? [instructor starts playing the audio recording for the dictation
        exercise]

In line 1, George asked students whether they were ready. His students were not attentive because they were busy talking among themselves. In line 4 George uttered a Japanese word, いきます *(Ikimasu). Ikimasu* is a statement that is generally used when one is ready to do something. People often use it to attract others' attention to their action. The students stopped talking and looked at their textbook as George uttered the word.

George explained that there is no equivalent word to *Ikimasu* in English which is useful in a context such as this. He elaborated on his use of Japanese that one or a few words in Japanese can help him capture students' attention and reaction especially when they are not listening or tired. George used the Japanese word which is linguistically and pragmatically more familiar to his students as he wanted to capture their attention in an efficient way.

The observation data suggests that using a Japanese word, George managed to inform his students that the audio recording was about to be played, stopped them from talking, and let them focus on the listening activity. The data shows that, George's codeswitching from English to Japanese functioned as a cue to gain students' attention to the listening activity.

Such language switching between L1 and L2 can work efficiently and economically to help instructors to attract students' attention when the class shares the same L1, and the lesson is conducted though the L2 (Harwood, 2022).

Excerpt 2 below illustrates an incident when the students were about to practice their speeches in front of the class. The students were quietly waiting for George to nominate them

to practice their speech. In this incident, George used a Japanese phrase in order to pay more respect and be polite to the students.

Excerpt 2: お願いします (*Onegaishimasu*)

1. T: OK? Ready? Lucky person No.1 is…Kenji. じゃ、お願いします。
2. S: [Looking down. No response.]
3. T: Stand up, read your speech. Speech time.
4. S: Speech? [Responding to the teacher. Looking nervous]
5. T: Yes. お願いします。
6. T: How about Ayumi? お願いします。

In line 1, George nominated one student, Kenji and then said a Japanese word, "お願いします" (*onegaishimasu*). Kenji did not respond so George repeated his instructions for Kenji (line 3). In line 4 George managed to elicit Kenji's response, and George responded to Kenji and said "お願いします" again. George nominated the other student, Ayumi, to work with Kenji and said "お願いします" to her.

George explained that the word, *onegaishimasu* is literally translated in English as *go ahead*. He further explained that nuance is slightly different between those two phrases because the English phrase, go ahead, does not have exactly the same meaning. He perceives that go ahead sounds top-down, and that *onegaishimasu* sounds more polite. More importantly, George believes the Japanese phrase is an appropriate expression to convey a more suitable meaning in the context.

Excerpt 2 is an example of when L2 instructors use the student L1 can provide affective support. George reflected that he used the Japanese phrase to create a supportive environment and to reduce the stress that students experience when presenting and giving speeches in front of the class. As Forman (2016) notes, many students in language classrooms are reluctant to speak the L2 in class, and instructor's use of the student L1 can facilitate easy and natural interaction between teacher and students. In a potentially stressful and uncomfortable context shown in Excerpt 2, George uses Japanese to attempt to ease the tense situation and lower students' anxiety.

Excerpt 3 below illustrates the incident when George was talking about the speaking test at the end of the lesson. The news about the upcoming speaking test was important information for George to relay to his students.

Excerpt 3: 楽しみ? (*Tanoshimi*)

1. T: Shush, shush! Let's talk about the speaking test next week. Does everybody know we have the speaking test next week?
2. Ss: Huff. [Several students sigh loudly]
3. T: 楽しみ？(Are you looking forward to it?)
4. Ss: No. No. No. [Several students respond at the same time]
5. T: But we had so much fun last time. You guys did a good job.
6. Ss: Good job! Good job! [A few students repeat what the instructor said]
7. T: Yah. This time, you will do a better job because it's your second time.

Most of the students were not listening to George when he started talking about the test while a few students reacted to the news. In line 3, George then said a Japanese word, 楽しみ (*tanoshimi*) as he continued to talk about the test. The word, *tanoshimi*, literally means *looking forward to something*. He used the Japanese word using a question form (by emphasizing the last part of the word). In response to his Japanese, his students responded to him in English.

George reflected on this incident and noted that his students seemed to have lost their concentration since it took place at the end of the 90-minute lesson. George explained that the news about the speaking test was not exciting for his students and that he intended to elicit students' reactions and ease the tension related to the speaking test. He understands that listening to English for the full lesson can be stressful for many students and perceives that a few Japanese words or short phrases in between the constant English makes his students laugh and can create a lighter atmosphere.

George reflected further. He thinks his language use and attitudes towards language choices are often an attempt to make the atmosphere more comfortable for his students and thus create a better learning environment. He believes that the use of the student L1 can work positively, however, too much Japanese can be an insult to some students because they are in the classrooms to learn English and may want to use English. Explaining further, George noted that some students may think that their instructor uses Japanese because they misunderstand their students' proficiency level of English. In such a case, he thinks that some students may lose face as they can speak more English in the classroom. While George thinks that use of the student L1 is not necessarily a negative practice when students need support for linguistic and affective reasons, he is interested in understanding his students' perceptions about his use of their L1 in his classrooms.

Summary

In line with other research findings (see Sert, 2005; Littlewood and Yu, 2011; Forman, 2016; Harwood, 2022) affective reasons and factors seem to influence George's use of codeswitching. As with the findings of Edstrom (2006), George also feels a moral obligation to his students, and that the use of the student L1 can help to create a comfortable classroom environment for students. Furthermore, Georges shifts from the L2 to L1 seems to work as a tool for classroom management in his EFL classroom when he needs to gain students' attention immediately and to convey information efficiently.

The observation data and George's interpretation of his language use in the interviews illustrate that he realizes his aim of creating a comfortable classroom atmosphere by making use of the student L1 based on his sociopragmatic knowledge in Japanese and Japanese EFL classroom contexts. As Tsui (2003) notes, experienced teachers are able to manage problems as they respond to events and issues based on their experience and provide alternatives in order to facilitate their teaching. Although instructors are often expected to plan how effectively the student L1 is used and to be able to articulate their purposes for its use, it can be difficult to "manipulate the teachers' language choices" (Levine, 2011, p. 145) because their use of the L1 is often embedded in their automated routines in the classroom (Sert, 2005). As discussed above, George's use of the student L1 is more than simply a literal translation to support students' limited proficiency in the L2. His L1 use conveys social, cultural, and pragmatic meanings that underlie the words.

Conclusion

Instructors use the student L1 for many reasons. L1 use can carry innumerable meanings and bring unanticipated effects to the classroom (Harwood, 2022) although such findings are very difficult to quantify. This study has shed some light on L2 instructors' L1 use from their perspectives especially on sociopragmatic aspects.

In EFL contexts such as Japan, the use of the student L1 in language classroom settings is often understood as a negative practice, and avoidance or minimization of the L1 tends to be praised. However, each classroom is a social space where teachers interact with students as they would with people in their real life. This study shows that the sociocultural context of the classroom can impact on the instructor's language choice in the classroom. George's language use is a reflection of the social norms that he follows and sociopragmatics that he understands beyond the language classroom setting.

The findings in this paper are highly context-dependent analyzed from a single case, nonetheless, the current study indeed shows that teachers' language choice is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. More studies that explore teachers' perspectives of the student L1 use and codeswitching in EFL classrooms will help clarify our understanding of underlying meaning and rationale about their L1 use. That will lay to rest the negative notion about L1 use as a hinderance to language learning that remains in EFL contexts such as Japan.

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