

## What do you think of the practice of using Japanese (the learners' L1) in the English classroom?

Recently I asked the above question to posters on ETJ's message board.

I'd like to thank all those who responded to the question. Below are some of the responses we received.

I conducted a survey with all our first and second year university students where English is a required subject. Interestingly, approximately half the students wanted 50% English, a quarter wanted 25% English, and a fifth of the students wanted 75% English. Only a twentieth wanted 100% English.

If meaning is at the center of learning, then there are times that framing an English communication in Japanese allows students to discern meaning that might otherwise be lost, or, if you are explaining an activity that will lead to language learning, they will at least know how to do it. So, in my opinion, in some classrooms, speaking Japanese is a must.

Is our only role in the English classroom to teach English? I think not. I sometimes have classes where barely a word of English is spoken, since we are engaged in some other kind of learning that seems just as important, but maybe not concrete enough to be a scheduled item in the curriculum, such as discussions on culture, personal values, human relations, or the like. I prefer to think of myself as a person developer instead of language teacher.

The catch is that we often fall into the trap of speaking more Japanese than we should.

### **Curtis Kelly**

Question: Will I damage my students' English ability if I use Japanese in my classroom?

Answer: Of course, not! The question is ridiculous. Is the English ability of your students damaged every time they use Japanese? Is yours?

Question: In order to make the best use of my time with my students,

should I restrict the language in my classroom to the target language?

Answer: Only if you don't care about being understood by at least half the class.

Question: Assuming that the meaning of a particular word like "cat" is known in the L1, but not in the target language, which language should I use to teach this word?

Answer: You can use English if you have a lot of time to kill before the bell rings to end the class, but explaining it in Japanese will go much faster.

### **Edward Mills**

I would prefer not to use Japanese at all in the classroom but I do not think this is possible at the kid's level. Thus I do use it for things that require explanation, but I always am sure to say it clearly in English, then explain it in Japanese and finally repeat it one more time in English. I would say that I use Japanese less than 25% in my classes and would like to use even less!

### **Kathleen Wada**

I teach junior and senior high and don't really use Japanese in the classroom besides the occasional word or two (maybe 1%). I also tell students that I don't speak Japanese. At the beginning of the year, this worked really well because I knew very little Japanese anyway, so it was quite convincing. For example, if students were cold and wanted to turn on the heater in the classroom, they had to say it in English in order for me to understand.

I think using Japanese can be very helpful and save time and benefit certain situations. I certainly miss the depth of interaction that I could have if I spoke better Japanese, and of course knowing students better helps in being a more effective teacher. Also I can't always tell if students are putting each other down, which is a very serious thing, but one benefit of maintaining English in the classroom is that it helps students

to keep making the effort and makes it part of all the peripheral language ("Where's your book? Why are you so tired?" etc), not just the exercises. Also students outside of class (hallway, lunch, after school) make the effort to speak English with me, whereas with their Japanese English teachers they only speak Japanese. I think this is an important part of the communicative approach.

### **Jan Vanderhill**

When I first started teaching conversational English I read that Japanese should not be spoken in the classroom. Previous teachers had believed in immersion methodology, so I tried the same.

I now teach at a low level, low motivated country high school. If I apply lessons I taught when I was teaching at a junior high school beforehand, sometimes even those are too 'difficult' for them. Therefore I resorted to using some Japanese in the classroom in order to get them to try the activities I set (where they would try and speak English). Motivation is a key ingredient whether to use Japanese or not. My kids are country teenagers whose Junior high school teachers applied the English-Japanese translation method, so they haven't been trained to listen. I have to train them to listen, work in partners, groups, change their attitude, before I can use more English.

### **Louise Ibraheim**

As a lifelong learner and teacher of EFL, let me share my view and experience. I now regard myself to be a bit better than the average Japanese in terms of skills of English. But I almost always find it easier and faster to have things explained in Japanese, especially when it comes to something abstract that I have yet to conceptualize in my mind.

I learned syntax in English, which was a totally new dimension to me. I had no trouble understanding every

word the professor spoke during his 90 minutes' lecture, with jokes, sarcasm, proverbs, often going off at a tangent all of a sudden and all that. I had no problem catching every word, but we would have found it much more helpful, if he had been able to give us that very technical term in Japanese. It never would have harmed us in any way.

**Mitsuko Takahashi**

Should Japanese be used in an English classroom? The ideal theory of "total immersion" might say, no. For practical realities, I limit the use of Japanese mainly to grammatical terms for instruction. At the Japanese language school I attended, the teachers used English grammatical terms only and I did not appreciate it. In my English classes, I teach the English grammatical terms but I define them in Japanese.

**Mark Jabusch**

For me, I think the questions of when, where and why it is appropriate to use Japanese in class are the wrong questions. I used to ask myself these questions and then it dawned on me — I should have been asking all along when, where and why it is NOT appropriate to use Japanese. I never let my students get by with using Japanese to say or do something that I know they can do in English. This goes for everything from asking to borrow a pen, rescheduling a class or even asking a classmate what page of the text we are on. If a student says something to me in Japanese that I know she can say in English I simply reply with "huh?" until she uses English. In class, I stop students whenever I hear Japanese, ask them to try to say whatever it is they are trying to say in English. This takes a bit of diligence but is well worth it I think. Also, once I had this change of heart it shocked some of my students who were used to using Japanese.

I am not opposed to using any Japanese. I only think it should be a last resort. I prefer to limit the use of L1 to times when it is absolutely necessary, not when it is convenient to make life easier for me or my students.



Limiting the use of Japanese helps students better comprehend the English input, or are at least better able to understand meaning from context.

For me, it all goes back to the teacher setting a positive example and being a good role model. One of the events that changed my whole attitude about L1 in the class concerned the language I used. I lightly scolded a student for using Japanese too often in class. I gave her the usual reasons—this is an English class, need the practice, hurts other students...etc. At the end she replied, "But Jason, you speak Japanese in class." She was right. "Do as I say not as I do" does not work.

**Jason Williams**

A few years ago I was thinking about this topic and I realized that my increased use of Japanese also depended on my pride in learning more Japanese. I wanted to use what I had learned. Before that I had depended solely on English, but as my Japanese vocabulary advanced I believe I subconsciously wanted to display my hard won learning, after all if I had acquired part of a new skill, wouldn't that improve me as a teacher?

As for using the Japanese grammar terms, I feel that using Japanese grammar doesn't help as much in clarifying things for the weaker students.

**Thomas Asada-Grant**

An important question might be this: Are you sure you want them thinking of the information in English from the beginning? Since you want fluency and complexity, you might point out that it is OK to be thinking about the content in their native language. Then, after a minute or two, ask them to go back and do "English please." They think about what they want to say with the specific mental task of deciding how they will say things.

**Marc Helgesen**

I'm greatly concerned with the number of professionals on this list advocating Japanese translations in the classroom, particularly where it concerns vocabulary. Anyone who's lived in Japan or studied the Japanese language long enough knows how misleading translation can be — English and Japanese are completely different conceptually, and even very simple nouns can't be accurately translated. You can imag-

ine how messy it gets with abstract nouns, verbs, or adjectives. I don't see why students learning vocabulary at this level can't just use a dictionary, but that's a separate issue.

This is not to say that Japanese 'explanations' don't have their place in the classroom, mind you... I'm just warning against the tendency to rely on translation.

#### **Ted Ekering**

Upon entering the class the students virtually demand I write, "Please don't speak Japanese" on the board, when they leave, they ask if it's ok for them to speak Japanese now....of course I always say no, and imagine they're speaking English for the rest of the day! If my students don't understand a word, a gesture, a noise, a picture on the board, a flashcard/poster, usually suffices. If that doesn't do the trick I might ask other students "how do you say.....in Japanese?"

Classes in Japanese are entirely unrelated to my job which is teaching elementary school and kindergarten kids and adults the valuable skills of communicating in English [imagine a math lecturer rambling on about relationships in class time]. Do you say your students have little need for English? What class did they sign up for? Will they never enter the job market or travel abroad or meet a foreigner? Isn't it our job to equip them for these tasks? If I went to a French or Japanese language class and it was conducted almost entirely in English I'd feel I was being taken for a ride. Class time is limited and we're paid to do an important job, which is to improve students' English ability.

#### **Dave Long**

"English-Only" in the classroom is only appropriate for English native speaker classrooms for 3 reasons:

1) Being bilingual (our students will never be English native speakers after all) is far more cognitively demanding than being monolingual. Thus if students have the meta-cognitive ability to switch from L1 to L2 then this should be exploited in language classrooms. Of course, at that time, as someone pointed out, you

could discuss the similarities or differences in L1/L2 cultural cognitive models for the language.

2) English-Only does not reflect the environment outside of the classroom. Indeed, the only place that is English-Only may be English classrooms. Therefore, an English-Only classroom represents a false reality to learners.

3) English-Only can give learners a negative image of their own language and culture. Are we saying we will accept you if you speak English but we will not accept your language or culture? Isn't most L1 used by learners in the classroom expressions of their language and culture? Otherwise, I completely agree that the use of L1 in the classroom should be kept to a minimum.

#### **Kent Hill**

I agree with the poster who said that using English pretty much 100% led to students' coming up with the English necessary to communicate with him. This has also been my experience over the past fifteen years in universities, junior colleges, and primarily in a private high school. Even if they have to consult a friend or a dictionary, students manage to scrape together enough English to excuse themselves for tardiness, make alternate arrangements to turn in homework, ask about subtle differences between two translations, ask me personal questions, etc.

#### **Peg Orleans**

At one university, a student survey was conducted on the use of L1 and L2 by English teachers. Teachers may argue that 90%+ use of L2 in English can only benefit students as it increases exposure to the target language and creates a realistic purpose for students to speak in English (in comparison, some students say speaking in English to Japanese English teachers is weird and nonsensical). The comments students wrote suggest that some use of Japanese by the native-speaker English instructor works as a kind of "security blanket", to comfort students and relieves them from the stress of hearing only English for 90 minutes.

#### **Mark Sheffner**

To empower a learner would require granting that they have the intellectual capacity to recognize what activities in the class are best suited to non-L1 usage, and this direction should come from the teacher naturally, though not many seem willing or able to do that in the students' language. With younger learners it is a greater challenge, but even a class with goals and a plan has little hope of success if that aspect of it cannot be communicated to the students.

I also employ the approach that requires the use of English for basic functions, though I get by with this because of where I work (i.e. the proficiency of the students). Other situations require other compensations, even within a single class, so I don't see how a teacher can blanket the issue with an English only stance. One idea that had some success was preparing a basic teaching philosophy translated into Japanese on a hand-out given the first day of class. It included the underpinnings of why during most of the class students would be expected to challenge themselves by staying in the target language with the help of classroom expressions. This clicked with SOME of the students, and with others I simply have to tell them that not striving to use English in English classes will affect their grade.

#### **Larry Walker**

Personally I feel the teacher has a responsibility to be a model learner. I think that it's important that the students know that you are also a language learner.

#### **Michael Stout**

I have always had a strong feeling/impression that students are motivated by the teacher trying to learn Japanese. I have found though, that it can emphasize the attitude that "a foreign language can only be learnt in a foreign country," so it is important to try and find out exactly how we are affecting people.

#### **Stephen Brivati**