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OUTREACH

My dream: Towards a methodology for using Japanese in the ESL classroom

Ted Bonnah has the ability to speak and write in Japanese, yet he prefers not to use these skills when he is teaching English. He obtained the top level (1-kyu) in JLPT, the Japanese Language Proficiency Test, in 2001 with a score of 297/400. An Anglophone, he obtained a *Certificat en Français Langue Seconde* from Université Laval in Quebec. But he didn't use French when teaching mixed ESL and English classes at L'École des Grands Vents in Canada, a francophone school for junior high school students and elementary classes of mixed English speakers, French speakers, and refugee children from different linguistic backgrounds.

Bonnah launched his teaching career in 1996 as a JET teacher in Kyushu. Returning to his native Canada, he leveraged the experience to develop a colorful and varied teaching record. From 2004 to 2005, he taught ESL to immigrants and refugees at the Association for New Canadians, an NPO, using the Canadian Language Benchmarks system. While enrolled in a B. Ed. in French and English and an M.A. program, he taught ESL and Introduction to Japanese classes at Memorial University. Now he is back in Japan teaching English Communication and Writing classes at Ritsumeikan University. In this essay for Outreach, Bonnah explains why he uses Japanese in his university classrooms "only when it is necessary and beneficial."

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In the autumn of 2007, while attending an ESL workshop in Fukuoka entitled *Using L1 in the L2 Classroom*, I had a beautiful dream. The tension in the room between an older Japanese teacher who insisted that she never used Japanese in her classes (perish the thought!), and a group of younger, "off-the-boat" first-time foreigner teachers pleading for advice or direction sapped my energy. I began to daydream. The workshop was overseen by a pony-tailed university chap who wanted to open a dialogue, but not offer any support or direction to either side.

My mind drifted to thinking about what would happen if the ruckus about using Japanese in the ESL classroom melted away, if we could all just agree that L1 is a tool like any other in the second language classroom, not much different from a tape recorder or a computer. There would be no more arguments, no more boasting from teachers who claim to use only English, no more parents or administrators putting pressure on those who do not, and no more guilt for those

…with David McMurray

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Outreach is a place where teachers from around the world can exchange opinions and ideas about foreign language learning and teaching. It provides outreach to classroom teachers who would not otherwise readily have access to a readership in Japan. The column also seeks to provide a vibrant voice for colleagues who volunteer to improve language learning in areas that do not have teacher associations. Up to 1,000 word reports from teachers anywhere in the world are welcomed. Contributors may also submit articles in the form of interviews with teachers based overseas.

of us who "slip up" and use Japanese. But like other teaching tools, the issue of what methodology should govern its use would still have to be resolved in the calm that would follow the storm. Just as the fervor over language labs in the 1960s went bust by the 1980s and computers in the classroom are still a bone of contention today, to avoid the problems that plagued the implementation of other educational tools we would need to clarify some rules and regulations for using Japanese in the classroom. McMillan, Rivers, and Cripps (2009) suggest that judicious L1 use may be a good strategic choice under certain circumstances, but to determine what circumstances suggest L1 use, three questions need to be answered: when should teachers use Japanese, what objectives can be met by it, and finally, who is entitled to use L1 in the L2 classroom?

Before a useful discussion can begin, however, we need to acknowledge the two great misunderstandings that underscore this debate. The first is that "Japanese use" does not mean using Japanese all the time. Just as an ESL teacher would not think of having a class use computers or audio labs all the time (unless they were in a specialized course that dictated this), "use" implies judicious employment only in situations where it could be said to benefit the student with increased learning and the teacher with better classroom management. Secondly, there is no such thing as "the" Japanese ESL classroom. There are innumerable variations in the composition and coordination of English lessons. Student ages may range from babies to university students to seniors, or a mix thereof, while direction could vary from clear objectives in a syllabus with a textbook to "free" conversation with neither. Teachers may be responsible for evaluation and course development, or they may just have to show up sober. Just as a teacher would never think of using PCs with toddlers (unless in a specialized setting), or using children's ABC books with adults, so too the characteristics of the class and requirements of the situation dictate whether use of Japanese is justified.

The first question we must ask ourselves is: How would we know when this tool is necessary? Classes where communication with students in English is difficult or impossible would seem to call for a modicum of Japanese use. If the problems are due to a lack of basic L2 ability, instructing and explaining in Japanese can clarify expectations, thereby allowing smoother English practice. In my beginner children's classes, I have found that an investment of 2 to 3 minutes explaining an activity or game in Japanese pays off with 20 to 30 minutes of English use. The activity can be re-explained in English at a later date, gradually "loading" students with teaching language and decreasing the need to explain in Japanese over time. In situations in which students lack motivation, especially where miscommunication causes classroom management problems, using Japanese may allow the teacher to help students get over these hurdles which prevent learning. In so-called "problem child" classes I have taught at both elementary and post-secondary levels, students have expressed their exhaustion and frustration when immersed in an all-English context for which they were unprepared. Birch (2010) confirms that code-switching to Japanese is equally a tool students use for communication, checking their performance, and building their L2 learner identity. By using Japanese to help troubled students over rough spots and ensure their success, I have been able to assist their transition from language learner to language user.

In addition to communication considerations, the presence or lack of successful language learning factors also determines whether using Japanese is appropriate. Ellis (2000) summarizes the factors of successful learners as internal attributes such as an ear for sounds, talent with grammar, an eye for connections, and a good memory, as well as external factors such as having a good reason to study or an interest in English. The fewer successful language-learning factors there are, the more judicious use of Japanese would seem to allow the teacher to help students compensate for these factors. Conversely, when more of these factors are present, the less need there would be to use Japanese. For instance, English immersion classes and those with motivated learners would not seem to require Japanese use. In such cases using L1 could even be detrimental to student motivation or the English learning environment.

The second question is: What objectives can be best served by using L1? For argument's sake,

we can break these into management objectives and learning objectives. At the post-secondary level, instructors have a duty to let students know assessment expectations and results, yet such explanations in English are often beyond the capabilities of the student. In such cases, the teacher or administrator would almost be ethically compelled to use whatever language the student understands to apprise them of their academic standing. It would be ideal if students were able to follow in English. When I was teaching English in Canada, I saw firsthand that this type of specialized pedagogic language was sometimes beyond most people's means. As for exercises with communication objectives, it seems antithetical that Japanese would be useful. For beginners it could be used to initially explain activities that later facilitate communication. Finally, since language is fundamentally a social construct, using Japanese could be a way for the teacher to bond with students, to show them that the teacher knows what it is like to be a language learner, and that the teacher has knowledge of a foreign language and culture that they are equally capable of achieving.

Finally, this question needs to be considered: How can we decide who could or should use Japanese in the classroom? Non-Japanese teachers should be able to concretely explain what students are to do, as well as be able to put abstract concepts into understandable terms. This means having at least JLPT level 2 and being confident with their spoken and written Japanese ability. In addition, to acquire the specialized language of instructors, foreign teachers could practice by observing competent Japanese native teachers, preferably in naturalistic situations like kokugo (Japanese language and literature) classes. In addition to the burden of ability (vocabulary, syntax, and nuance), a foreigner would also have to show that they possess the judgment to use L1 only to benefit the class. All too often, both foreign and Japanese teachers limit themselves to words like *dame* (Stop that!) and *shizuka* (Be quiet!)—negative reinforcement that derails classroom management over time, and thus should be avoided. Only Japanese words that illuminate problems and solutions, and that encourage students to do their best, should be employed. Naturally, although native Japanese speakers have L1 communication ability, similar good judgment would also be required of them.

Will my dream ever become a reality? Probably not. But for teachers grappling with mixed-level classes, a wide range of ages, classroom management and learning disability issues, as well as evaluation and counseling duties, judicious use of L1 can be a boon. Although no consensus on Japanese use may ever be reached by the teaching community, it is up to each educator to determine for himself or herself whether Japanese use can improve their teaching results, and whether they have the ability to wield it.

References

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Bonnah (third from left) studies Japanese with classmates.