Teachers' Use of L1 in Elementary School EFL Classes

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Foreign language activities will be implemented for all the grade 5 and 6 pupils in elementary schools throughout Japan in 2011. However, more than three fourths of the elementary school teachers were not confident in teaching English (Benesse Kyoiku Kenkyu Kaihatsu Center, 2007) and an effective teacher training is indispensable. This study focused on teachers' use of their pupils' L1, which is Japanese, in the elementary school EFL classes. A questionnaire was administered both to teachers and pupils in order to examine their perceptions of L1/TL use, whereas classroom observation data were analyzed to explore how the L1 was used. The results show that the homeroom teachers expected themselves and were expected by their pupils to speak more English and that it might be helpful for the homeroom teachers to learn some specific expressions so that they can use more English in the classrooms.

1. Introduction

In 2011, foreign language activities will be implemented for all the grade 5-6 pupils in elementary schools. The overall objective of the foreign language activities is:

> To deepen the understanding of languages and cultures through the experience of foreign language learning; to encourage efforts towards communication; to familiarize children with foreign language sounds and fundamental expressions; and to develop a foundation of basic communication abilities.
>
> (MEXT, 2008)

Ahead of this fullest implementation, almost all of the elementary schools throughout Japan have already conducted English activities somehow. According to Benesse Kyoiku Kenkyu Kaihatsu Center (2007), however, more than three fourths of the elementary school teachers were not

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confident in teaching English and about half of them regarded their lack of English proficiency as the urgent issue. Given that the in-service homeroom teachers (HRTs) in elementary schools, who teach all the subjects by themselves but have not been trained in teaching English, cannot find enough time improving their English proficiency, effective training program should be developed. In this study I will focus on the teachers' language use in Japanese elementary school EFL classrooms.

There are many researchers who have been concerned about teachers' use of their students' L1. Chaudron (1985) maintains that not only instruction and drills but also disciplinary and management operations in the target language (TL) are essential to achieve the fullest competence in the TL. Atkinson (1987) also emphasizes the importance of input of the target language, but suggests that L1 can be a valuable resource if it is used at appropriate times and in appropriate ways such as 1) eliciting language, 2) checking comprehension, 3) giving complex instructions to basic levels, 4) cooperating in groups, 5) explaining classroom methodology at basic levels, and 6) translating to highlight a recently taught language item. Cole (1998) insists that teachers should consistently demonstrate that they are not prepared to use L1 in order to show their genuine desire for students to acquire the TL. They can, however, provide a safe and stimulating environment by regularly considering when and how to use L1. Auerbach (1993) states that using L1 provides a sense of security and validates the ESL learners' lived experiences. Besides, Using L1 in a foreign language classroom is sometimes regarded as the result of teacher's poor proficiency in the target language, but aside from the teacher's proficiency there are some other variables that may play a role in determining the amount of L1/TL, such as language type, departmental policy, lesson content, materials and formal teacher training (Duff and Polio, 1990). Teachers' use of their students' L1 seems to have pros and cons. In fact, how do the teachers use their pupils' L1 in the elementary school EFL classrooms?

The present study aimed to investigate how much and for what purposes teachers use their pupils' L1 as well as how they perceive their language use. Specifically, the following research questions were asked:

(1) Are there any differences between the teachers' perceived current and ideal L1 use?
(2) For what purposes do they use L1 in the EFL classrooms?

2. The studies

In order to address the first research question the researcher administered a questionnaire on the perceptions of teachers' language use to both teachers and pupils. As to the second research question, the transcripts of the observed classes were examined.

2.1. Questionnaire

2.1.1. Methodology

This study was conducted in a city in Kanto area designated as a special educational zone in 2005. The pupils have 35 English lessons a year in Grade 3 to 6 and 16 lessons in Grade 1 and 2. An HRT and a JTE always team-teach in English classes, sometimes with an assistant language teacher (ALT). Basically, HRTs' and JTEs' mother tongues are the same as their pupils' L1: Japanese.

Two different types of questionnaires were made and distributed in School R where the researcher was working as a JTE in 2009. A questionnaire for HRTs was composed of four multiple-choice questions about their perceived current and ideal language use and two open-ended questions such as:

- Why do you think the amount of L1 use you chose is ideal?
- Why do you think there is a gap between ideal and current uses of L1/TL if any?

14 HRTs responded to the questionnaire. The other questionnaire was given to 22 Grade 5 pupils. They were asked:

- How much L1/TL do you think the JTE use?
- How much L1/TL do you think the homeroom teacher use?
- How much L1/TL do you want the teachers to use?

2.1.2. Results and Discussions

Table 1 shows the HRTs' perceptions of the current and ideal proportions of language use.

Table 1. Homeroom teachers' perceptions of language use

	JTE		HRT	
	current	ideal	current	ideal
100% in English	0	3	0	0
mostly in English	7	6	0	0
50% in Japanese	7	5	3	13
mostly in Japanese	0	0	11	1
100% in Japanese	0	0	0	0

Three teachers thought that JTEs should speak only in English in the classrooms because they believed 1) exposure in English may stimulate pupils' learning, 2) pupils need to hear authentic pronunciation or 3) pupils can guess the meanings of even difficult words if they hear them repeatedly. On the other hand, one teacher who believed even a JTE should speak 50% in Japanese claimed that directions were not clear to the pupils if given only in English. Even though most teachers perceived that they usually spoke in Japanese in the EFL classes, almost all the HRTs believed they should speak more English. One of those HRTs claimed that it is important for the HRTs as a role model to show their pupils the teachers' positive attitudes toward speaking English even if they are not good at it. Another HRT suggested that HRTs should provide some sense of security for their pupils by using their mother tongue as well as they should raise the pupils' intrinsic motivations by showing how cool being able to speak English is.

The HRTs, in general, seemed to be content with the JTE's language use, whereas they were not satisfied with their own language use. Why was there a big gap between the HRTs' ideal and current L1 use? One teacher claimed that their proficiency of English hinders their use of the TL. Another teacher pointed out that HRTs do not have confidence in speaking English and do not know when and how to use

English. Why are they not confident about their English proficiency even though they learned English for more than 6 years in schools? A teacher in his 30s complained that English Education he received was not good enough for the learners to have a good command of English. In fact, conventional English teaching focused almost only on reading and writing, and the learners hardly had a chance to develop speaking skills. One teacher stated the HRTs do not have enough time to discuss lesson preparation with the JTE. If the HRTs had time to do so, it would be easier for them to get involved in the English activities.

Table 2. Pupils' perceptions of teachers' language use

	JTE's current use	HRT's current use	Teachers' ideal use of language
100% in English	0	0	1
mostly in English	8	6	9
50% in Japanese	14	13	11
mostly in Japanese	0	3	1
100% in Japanese	0	0	0

According to Table 2, nearly half of the pupils wanted the English classes conducted almost all in English. Compared with the results of the HRTs perceptions of language use, this may imply the HRTs may underestimate the pupils' understanding of the target language or their tolerance of ambiguity.

2.2. Observation

Miyazato (2007) conducted a study focusing on a JTE's and an ALT's codeswitching. She found that the ALT used the students' L1 to increase their understanding, to praise them, and to reduce their fear of making mistakes in class while the JTE used it for translating the ALT's utterances, encouraging her students, or giving personal comments to them. Her study was held in a high school where licensed Japanese teachers of English teach the students, whereas to date there have been few studies focusing on the teachers' L1 use at elementary schools. In the previous study, I found that the HRTs wanted and were expected by their pupils to speak more English. However, it may take a lot of time and

effort to improve their English speaking skills. The second study examined for what purposes teachers would use L1 to seek for useful English expressions HRTs should know.

2.2.1. Participants

The researcher used the observation data which she had collected before the first study. The observations were conducted in 2007 and 2008 in the same city as in the first study. The participants were 6 pairs of JTEs and HRTs at 6 different public elementary schools. Five observed classes were Grade 5 and the other was Grade 6.

2.2.2. Methodology

5 classes (Schools P, Q, R, S, and T) were videotaped and later transcribed while field notes were taken in School U. The teachers' turns which included L1 were counted and categorized according to 'Teachers' use of the first language' by Cameron (2001):

Explaining aspects of the foreign language (Explanation)
Translating words or sentences (Translation)
Giving instructions (Instruction)
Checking understanding of concept, talk, text, instructions (Checking understanding)
Eliciting language (Elicit language)
Talking about learning (talk about learning)
Giving feedback (Feedback)
Disciplining and control (Control)
Informal, friendly talk with pupils (Informal talk)

The excerpts below show the examples of categorization.

Excerpt 1
HRT: Eigo ga muzukashii no kana?
Is it difficult for you to describe it in English?
(Checking understanding 1)

Excerpt 2
JTE: Hai. Dewa Iidesuka? Kono retsu no hito, mae ni dete kudasai. Sassato ikimashou.

OK. Are you ready? This line, come to the front. Hurry up.
(Instruction 1)

If a turn functioned in two ways, it was counted in both categories.

Excerpt 3
JTE: Summer. Why? Why? Doshite? Doshite?
(Translating 1 / Elicit language 1)

2.2.3. Results & Discussion

Table 3 shows the result of the numbers of teachers' turns using L1 and its proportions to their total turns in each school.

Table 3 Number of turns including Teachers' L1 use

	School P	School Q	School R	School S	School T	School U
Number of turns including Teachers' L1 use	34 (100)	10 (100)	32 (100)	48 (100)	6 (100)	24 (100)
Teachers' total turns	192	70	166	226	131	*
Proportions of teachers' L1 use to their total turns	18%	14%	19%	21%	5%	*

*The proportion of the teacher's L1 use could not be calculated because not all her utterances but only her L1 use was recorded during the lesson observation.

L1 was used in all explored classes, but the proportions of the numbers of teachers' turns including L1 to their total turns varied depending on the teachers.

Table 4 JTEs' L1 use

	School P	School Q	School R	School S	School T	School U
Translation	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (12.5)	7 (29.2)	0 (0.0)	1 (16.7)
Control	1 (4)	0 (0)	0 (0.0)	4 (16.7)	0 (0.0)	2 (33.3)
Informal talk	1 (4)	0 (0)	1 (12.5)	1 (4.2)	0 (0.0)	1 (16.7)
Checking understanding	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
Instruction	18 (72)	3 (100)	2 (25.0)	6 (25.0)	2 (33.3)	1 (16.7)
Explanation	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (12.5)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	1 (16.7)
Elicit language	4 (16)	0 (0)	1 (12.5)	4 (16.7)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
Talk of learning	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
Repetition of what Pupil said	1 (4)	0 (0)	2 (25.0)	0 (0.0)	1 (16.7)	0 (0.0)
Talk to the other teacher	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
Giving feedback	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0.0)	2 (8.3)	2 (33.3)	0 (0.0)
Others	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	1 (16.7)	0 (0.0)
	25 (100)	3 (100)	8 (100)	24 (100)	6 (100)	6 (100)

Even though JTEs often took a role of providing input in the TL to the students, all the JTEs in each explored school used L1. However, how they used L1 was different. In Schools P and Q, L1 was mostly used for instruction, whereas in the rest of the explored schools it was used in various ways such as translation, control and feedback.

Table 5 HRTs' L1 use

	School P	School Q	School R	School S	School T	School U
Translation	0 (0)	0 (0)	3 (13)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Control	1 (11)	0 (0)	4 (17)	5 (21)	0 (0)	6 (33)
Informal talk	0 (0)	0 (0)	5 (21)	3 (13)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Checking understanding	0 (0)	0 (0)	3 (13)	0 (0)	0 (0)	5 (28)
Instruction	4 (44)	5 (71)	4 (17)	4 (17)	0 (0)	3 (17)
Explanation	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Elicit language	1 (11)	0 (0)	5 (21)	0 (0)	0 (0)	3 (17)
Talk of learning	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Repetition of what Pupil said	1 (11)	0 (0)	0 (0)	6 (25)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Talk to the other teacher	0 (0)	1 (14)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Giving feedback	2 (22)	1 (14)	0 (0)	5 (21)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Others	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (4)	0 (0)	1 (6)
Total turns	9 (100)	7 (100)	24 (100)	24 (100)	0 (0)	18 (100)

The HRTs' L1 use was categorized in Table 5. The HRT in School T was unique in that he never used L1. In Schools P and Q, the HRTs used L1 the most for instruction just as their partner JTEs did, and in Schools R, S, and U, the HRTs used it for classroom control, checking understanding, informal talk or eliciting language other than instruction.

Though telling students how well they have done in their own language may make the praise more 'real' (Cook, 2001), L1 was not used so frequently to give feedback including praise for the students' performances except in School S. This may be because expressions for praise such as "good" or "great" are included in "Classroom English," and are familiar enough to both teachers and pupils. On the other hand, L1 was rather frequently used for giving instructions. As mentioned in the literature review section, L1 can be a valuable resource if it is used at appropriate time and in appropriate ways such as giving complex instructions and explaining classroom methodology at basic levels (Atkinson, 1987). In the explored schools, most pupils learned English only once a week for a few years and therefore giving instructions in their L1 must have been useful to carry out the activities smoothly. However, if both the HRTs and their pupils learn and get familiar with the expressions for giving instructions or classroom control, the amount of input in the TL will increase, which will facilitate the pupils' language learning.

3. Concluding remarks

The results show that the teachers did use L1 in the English classes, although the numbers of turns and the usages varied. Even though L1 plays some important roles such as giving instruction, elicit language and classroom control, HRTs expected themselves and were expected by their pupils to use more TL. Giving a lot of comprehensible and meaningful input is important in the language classroom (Krashen, 1985) and in order to maximize the target language, appropriate training programs which help both in-service and pre-service teachers improve their English proficiency are needed. To make the training programs more efficient, it might be a good idea to introduce useful expressions in English for giving instructions, checking understanding, classroom

control and elicit language.

4. Limitations

This study was conducted in the classrooms where homeroom teachers worked with Japanese teachers of English, who had a good command of English. There are many schools which cannot afford any assistant language teachers and where HRTs are supposed to teach English by themselves. Further research will be needed to explore other problems and needs in different settings.

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