

Examining the Use of L1 by Native-level English Teachers

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the world of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), there is a predominant mantra of “English-only” (monolingual) classes and the idea that absolute immersion in the target language will enable learners to maximise their learning potential. Especially in the context of native-level English teachers (NETs), many of whom do not share the same mother tongue as their learners, it is understandable that this overriding belief exists. This mixed-methods study was conducted to assess the extent to which NETs use L1 in EFL classes in the Greater Tokyo Area for ‘academic’, ‘managerial’, and ‘social & cultural’ aspects of EFL pedagogy as well as to examine their attitudes towards this approach. Overall, it was found that NETs do not use L1 to a great extent, but attitudes towards the facilitative use of L1 for ‘academic’ purposes were generally positive.

INTRODUCTION & CONTEXT

Leading up to the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, the guidelines of the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) stipulated that for lower secondary schools, classes will be “conducted in English in principle” (MEXT, 2015: 4), and that upper high school classes will be conducted in English only and would cover “high-level linguistic activities” (MEXT, 2015: 4). This corresponds with the English-only policies of various teaching establishments such as schools and universities and private institutions where learners pay for tuition.

However, according to a study by ‘Education First’(2021), Japan is ranked 13th in Asia and 78th in the world for overall English proficiency, and this is a sharp decline from the previous year (11th and 49th respectively). This could be explained by the teacher-focused nature of Japanese education which limits learner output, and the cultural fear of not making mistakes and saving face. Given this poor ranking for such an economically and technologically advanced nation, the MEXT guidelines appear either highly ambitious, or are not producing sufficient results. Assessing whether or not these guidelines are being followed can be done by examining the extent of pedagogical L1 use in classes by native-level English teachers (NETs), and for further insight as to whether the MEXT guidelines are suitable, examining their attitudes towards such an approach. For the purposes of this research, the term “native-level” is not exclusive to teachers from countries where English is the first language, but also includes teachers who have acquired native-level proficiency from any country and who teach in the role as a NET.

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In a Japanese pedagogical context, as per the MEXT guidelines, NETs are not expected to use L1 in the classroom, and a vast number of NETs do not possess the same mother tongue as their learners. This is seen as a positive by various employers in that it gives students no alternative than to listen and respond by only using English in an immersive environment. To NETs with L1 proficiency, some teaching companies even advise them to feign ignorance if students repeatedly revert to their primary language. It is difficult to consistently summarise exactly what happens in EFL classes as global teaching attitudes and contexts vary, but this study aimed to offer insight as to the use and attitudes of L1 use within the Greater Tokyo Area. In this metropolis of close to 40 million people, there is a vast preponderance of NETs teaching in contexts ranging from pre-school children to adults, a vast majority of which do not possess native-level L1 proficiency.

To assess the extent and pedagogical use of L1 by NETs in the Greater Tokyo Area, a theoretical framework devised by Sali (2013) was utilised to focus on three key aspects:

1. Academic - explaining and teaching the contents of a lesson.
2. Managerial – classroom management.
3. Social/Cultural – building rapport inside and outside the classroom.

Such a framework is suitable in that it covers a range of practical pedagogical purposes and formed the basis for the following research questions:

1. To what extent is L1 used by NETs in EFL classes in the Greater Tokyo Area?

2. What are the attitudes of NETs towards the use of L1 in EFL classes in the Greater Tokyo Area?

LITERATURE REVIEW

First, there will be an overview of how English-only monolingual policies rose to prominence, and then an outline of some of the literature pertaining to the advantages and demerits of this approach.

Historical Background and Beginnings

Ironically, early teaching practices relied on a symbiosis of L1 and L2 existing in a coterminous existence with the predominance of the ‘grammar-translation method’. This focused on direct translation with little to no communicative function (Larsen-Freeman, 2008), and Harmer (2007b: 48-49) highlights how it “teaches people about language but doesn’t really help them to communicate effectively with it”. This drawback instigated the demise of the grammar-translation method. Towards the end of the 19th century, commerce, trade and travel, and the mass migration of people in Europe precipitated the increased need for communication, with America having particular influence in this regard (Richards and Rogers, 1999). As migrants from various cultural backgrounds flocked to The United States for a new life, incorporating multiple L1s in a classroom setting was not a viable approach so the monolingual approach began to take precedence (Hawks, 2001).

The grammar-translation method was the antecedent of the ‘Direct method’ which allows for zero translation, and all classroom instruction comes directly from the L2 (Larsen-Freeman,

2008). This method focuses on accuracy and repeated speaking practice that produces output related to objects and pictures (Harmer, 2007a), but has been criticised for relying too heavily on the skill of the teacher without a textbook and is time consuming for demonstrating vocabulary when a simple translation can suffice (Richard and Rogers, 1999). Borne out of this approach came the rise of the ‘Berlitz method’ devised by the eponymous Maximilian Berlitz, which is still in operation in private institutions around the world today and is partly relevant to this study.

This preceded the rise of ‘communicative language teaching’ (CLT) and represented a paradigm shift in EFL, and this sought to maximise L2 exposure so that learners can understand the functions of language with communicative intent and through the use of authentic materials (Larsen-Freeman, 2008). The ‘interactionist approach’ is at the heart of the L2-only principle and claims that target language input is crucial in order to achieve successful target language acquisition and that L1 use should be completely excluded.

Attitudes to the Monolingual ‘L2-Only’ Approach

Long (1996) states that target language input from teachers is crucial for successful language acquisition, and this is supported by Krashen (1985) who outlines a strong link between comprehensive input and L2 ability. Nation (2003) reiterates the importance of L2-only as learning can be achieved via focused input. This is supported by Cook (2001) who states that the target language will remain incomprehensible to learners if deprived of opportunities to hear or practice it, and that it is beneficial for learners to extrapolate meaning from contexts provided in L2-only. Studies by Lochsky (1994) and Yi and Sun (2013) both show that comprehensible input from NETs in a monolingual classroom can produce positive effects upon language acquisition.

However, the monolingual approach has been criticised as dogma that is blindly adhered to, and conveniently serving the language requirements of NETs over effective teaching (Weschler, 1997). Phillipson (2005) claims that the monolingual approach is tantamount to “linguistic imperialism” in that English is unfairly privileged by possessing dominance over L1. Phillipson (1992) advocates for native L1 speakers being more effective teachers as they not only are more proficient in the learners’ L1 (assuming all learners share the same L1) but they can also empathise with the struggles that learners encounter as they too have studied the same language.

The aforementioned ‘Berlitz method’ insists on strict adherence to the monolingual approach and is outlined on the company’s main website (<https://teach.berlitz.co.jp/faq/>):

“All Berlitz lessons are taught exclusively in the target language. The customer's native language is never used in the classroom.”

The use of the word “customer” implies an emphasis on profits instead of proficiency but is nonetheless very indicative as to why this method (and ergo company) focuses on a monolingual approach. Weschler (1997) postulates that classes in Berlitz schools are limited to a small group of learners due to the difficulty in being unable to tailor-make classroom instructions for a larger mixed-ability group of learners due to their L2-only policy.

Use and Perceptions of L1 in EFL

Despite the MEXT guidelines advocating for a monolingual approach, there is sizeable support for the pedagogical use of L1 in classes. Holthouse (2006) states that L1 can be used for comprehension checking, giving instructions and generating a positive class atmosphere. Auerbach (1993) writes that L1 reduces the boundaries for target language acquisition, and is supported by Hawkins (2015) who claims that L1 can reduce class anxiety by instating a level playing field. There are also pragmatic benefits as L1 can be used to explain difficult concepts and meta language which could be exponentially more time consuming in L2 (Ara and Shorna, 2018).

There is also considerable research to support the use of L1. A study by Usadiati (2009) with Indonesian learners found that increased use of L1 significantly helped university learners improve their written competency, which was supported by Alshammari (2011) with Saudi Arabian university learners. He (2012) found that utilising similarities between the native and target language helped learners scaffold their L2 acquisition, and Song and Lee (2019) discovered that code-switching between L1 and L2 by Korean English teachers produced higher mean vocabulary test scores and favourability ratings from pre-school learners in South Korea.

Teachers' uses and perceptions of L1

The aforementioned work by Sali (2013) outlined 3 key uses for L1: 'academic' (explaining and teaching the contents of a lesson), 'managerial' (classroom management), and 'social/cultural' (building rapport inside and outside the classroom). In his study, teachers expressed favourability towards 'academic' purposes as this expedited the process of learner comprehension in a highly pragmatic manner. This is supported by Jingxia (2010) in the context of Chinese universities for translating vocabulary, new concepts, and explaining grammar. A study by Alsheri (2017), who also found that non-native teachers as well as NETs favoured 'academic' uses for vocabulary translation, showed that teachers also favour 'social/cultural' uses for building rapport with learners in order to foster a more relaxed classroom environment.

There has been comparatively little research done on the perceptions and attitudes of NETs towards the pedagogical use of L1. Research by Balabakgil (2016) showed that both NETs and non-native EFL teachers had very positive attitudes towards using L1 in lower-proficiency EFL university classes. In this study, based on survey data, the non-native teachers agreed that L1 was necessary for helping learners to learn the target language "more effectively" and for motivation by telling jokes and lightening the mood in class. For the NETs surveyed in the study, 'academic' uses of L1 for explaining complex grammar points and preventing learners from feeling frustration were particularly advocated. Carson (2014) found that native teachers and NETs have positive attitudes to L1 for a range of pedagogical purposes. 'Academic' uses included comprehension checking, explaining grammar, translating vocabulary, and reviewing material. Other 'managerial' uses were found to be positively perceived such as explaining test procedures, as well as 'social/cultural' reasons in discussing various societal issues. Ford (2009) found that L1 is not used by NETs, but were more receptive to this approach. Conversely, Kim and Petraki (2009) found a big difference in attitudes towards non-native teachers and NETs with the former far more receptive to the use of L1 whereas the latter were far more reluctant.

As the literature review demonstrates, opinions towards the monolingual approach vary and research is fairly limited. Given the size and scope of the Greater Tokyo Area, there is considerable scope for potential research in this area of which this study aims to contribute.

METHODOLOGY

Outline and Participants

This research was conducted using a mixed-methods approach using quantitative data (a questionnaire) as well as qualitative data (recorded one-to-one interviews and comments sections). Four one-to-one interviews with NETs were recorded which gave crucial in-depth insight towards answering the research questions.

A total of 24 NET participants were recruited from a variety of teaching contexts in the Greater Tokyo Area. These included schools (learner age 12-18), universities (learner age 18-22) and private institutions (all age ranges). Private institutions include the aforementioned ‘Berlitz’ and are companies where learners pay for either one-to-one tuition or in classes that rarely exceed six learners. In Japan, such an institution is known as an ‘eikaiwa’, but will be referred to as private institutions. There were 10 school NET participants, 6 university NET participants, and 8 private institution NET participants. No pre-school or elementary school NETs took part in the study, but this is an area for future research. The participants have a range of experience from being first year teachers to one teacher having more than 20 years’ experience, and a range of learner abilities. 3 stated that they teach beginners, 9 stated that they teach pre-intermediate, 5 stated that they teach intermediate and 5 stated that they teach advanced, with only 2 NETs stating that they teach to classes of mixed ability. For Japanese L1 ability, as asked on the questionnaire, 4 NETs responded that they are beginners, 9 responded that they are pre-intermediate, 7 responded that they are intermediate and 4 claimed that they have advanced Japanese. With regards to the average class size, all private institution NETs responded that their class sizes are between 1-6 learners, and all school and university NETs responded that their average class size is 16-30 learners.

The Questionnaire

The opening page (*appendix A*) acquired some basic background information from each participant. The second page (*appendix B*) asked questions on a Likert scale about using L1 in classes for ‘academic’, ‘managerial’, and ‘social/cultural’ uses, as well as to what extent their employers permit or discourage them from using L1 in or outside of the classroom. The third page (*appendix C*) focused on attitudes towards using L1 for ‘academic’ (grammar and vocabulary), ‘managerial’ (motivation and L2 practice), and ‘social/cultural’ (confidence and learner perception) purposes. There were optional comment boxes on both pages for participants to include any additional thoughts.

One-to-one Interviews

Four participants from different teaching contexts were interviewed for further insight as to their use and attitudes towards L1 in the classroom. One NET worked in a school, one in a university, and two NETs worked in separate private institutions. Each participant was asked open-ended questions with follow up questions to enable them to elaborate on their answers. Each conversation was recorded and qualitatively analysed for an in-depth analysis. To comply with the ethical requirements of the study, participants' answers remained anonymous. Due to the monolingual policies of various teaching institutions in the Greater Tokyo Area, it was imperative to keep the identity of each participant secret should they express negative views about their employer or be seen to challenge the monolingual principles which they may or may not be obliged to follow.

Limitations of Research

The main limitation was the small sample size as only 24 participants took part. In addition to this, no pre-school or elementary school NETs took part in the study which would have offered a broader range of feedback and data. Ideally, a minimum of 50 participants would have taken part with at least 10 NETs from each teaching context taking part. This in turn limited the potential validity of various factors which might determine the extent of L1 usage such as teaching dynamics, L1 proficiency, learner ability, and class sizes.

FINDINGS

NETs Use of L1

The findings from section 1 (**FIGURE 1**) show that NETs do not predominantly use L1 for 'academic', 'managerial', nor 'social/cultural' uses and that the use of L1 is generally not encouraged. Despite this, some teaching institutions allow the occasional or frequent use of L1 in their classes. One school NET commented that because of the "low level of English", they occasionally use a combination of L1 and L2. This is supported by a teacher working in a private institution who stated that using L1 "is a very fast and efficient way to concept check and cuts down on teacher talk time". This supports the statement by Ara and Shorna (2018) when they claim that using L1 is time-effective for explaining difficult ideas.

'Academic' use of L1

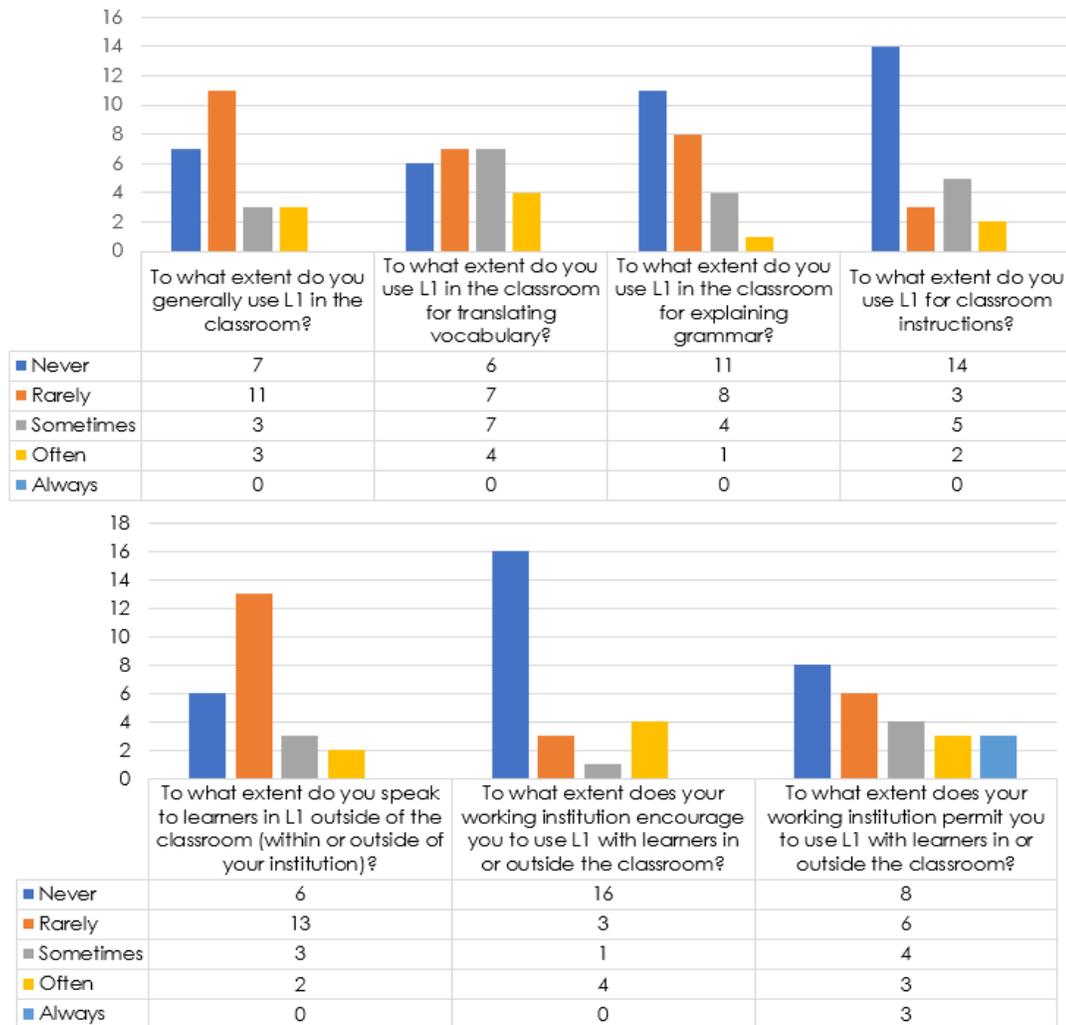
As shown in **FIGURE 1**, the 'academic' use of L1 for translating vocabulary was the most common which supports the study by Alsheri (2017). One university teacher stated on their questionnaire that a simple translation of an item of vocabulary or grammar point "can have the short-term gain of helping the student to keep up which supports their confidence", but also warns against the overuse of L1 in case they become too reliant on it. For other 'academic' purposes, using L1 to explain grammar is not common with one NET stating that it is unnecessary as their classes often practice a solitary grammar point and that the meaning is made clear in a variety of ways in the classroom. This was supported by a university NET who stated

that their classes focus more on communicative language teaching and therefore require less emphasis on specific grammar points.

‘Managerial’ use of L1

The ‘Managerial’ use of L1 for classroom management is also not common which supports the findings of Kim and Petraki (2009). Furthermore, one private institution NET claimed that, due to the small number of students in each class, there is little need for giving instructions which supports the claims made by Weschler (1997). Conversely, one university NET stated that they used L1 for this purpose in a previous job where the average learner level was far lower as the students responded better. This idea supports the ideas from Holthouse (2006) and Ara and Shorna (2018) about the pragmatic benefits of using L1.

FIGURE 1
NETs overall use of L1 in the classroom



‘Social/Cultural’ use of L1

‘Social/cultural’ uses of L1 proved to be a rare occurrence even when there is potentially less pressure on NETs to follow a strict monolingual policy before or after a class. A school NET claimed that their students “*seem happy enough*” to converse in English outside of classes, although one university NET claimed that they occasionally use L1 to talk about shared cultural interests. As previously mentioned, multiple teaching institutions, especially private institutions, lean towards a strict monolingual policy as a vast majority of NETs are not encouraged to use L1 in classes, and a slight majority are not permitted in any way to converse with learners in L1. One private institution NET was explicit about their company’s monolingual policy:

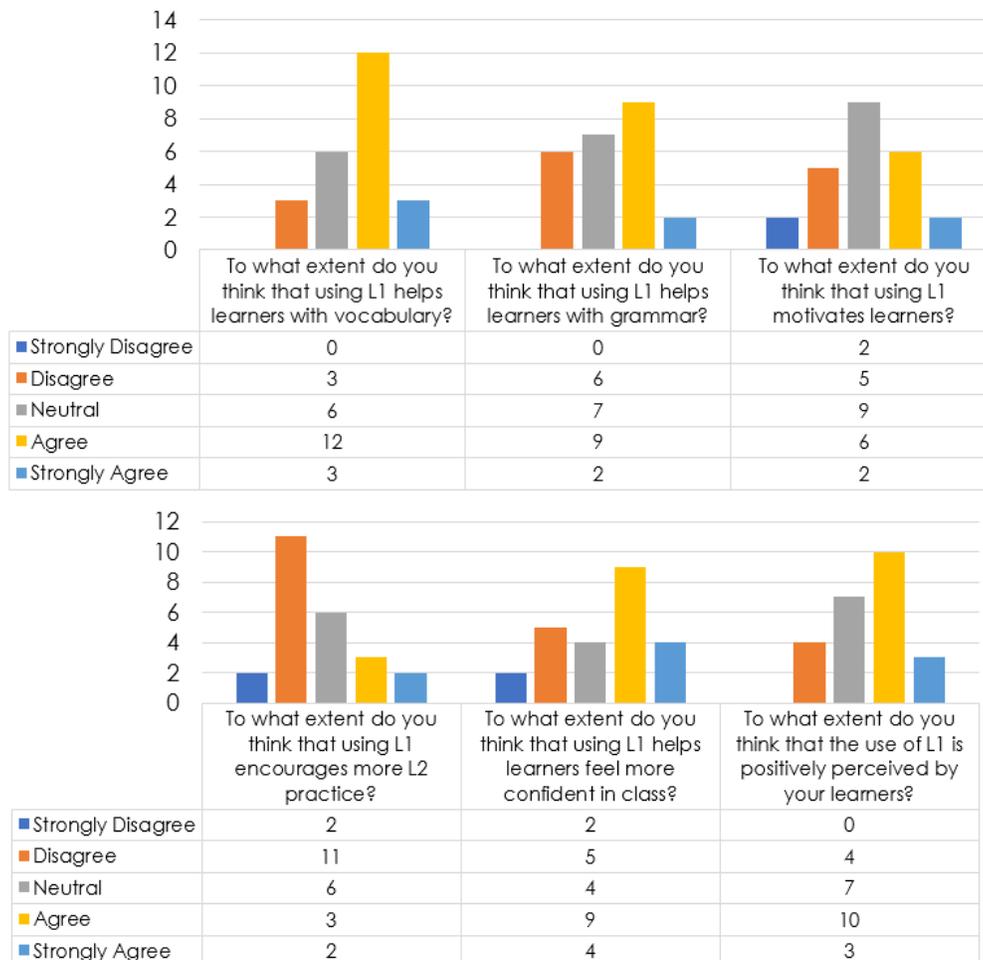
“There’s a 100% insistence that only English is used and we could face disciplinary action if we are caught using Japanese in class”.

This would seemingly lend weight to the critique by Phillipson (2005) that English has “a natural right” to be the default language in EFL classes.

NETs’ Attitudes to Using L1

The overall quantitative findings can be seen in **FIGURE 2** and are generally more mixed.

FIGURE 2
NETs overall attitudes to the use of L1 in the classroom



Attitudes towards the ‘academic’ use of L1

NETs expressed strong support for ‘academic’ purposes, most notably for translating vocabulary which supports the study by Alshammari (2011). A school NET claimed that they never use L1 for ‘academic’ purposes, but they acknowledge how less proficient learners can benefit, and this was supported by the university teacher interviewed who stated that, although they do not often use L1 for translating grammar, from a learner’s perspective, they “*certainly see the benefits*”. Private institution NETs also favoured vocabulary translation with one NET claiming that they felt frustrated by the strict monolingual policy.

Attitudes towards the ‘managerial’ use of L1

For ‘managerial’ purposes such as motivating learners, attitudes were predominantly neutral. A private institution NET commented that using L2 is more effective with older students as if they are motivated or have a clear goal then they “*tend to remember more*”. The university NET interviewed stated that different classes are motivated in different ways and have different specific needs. For the ‘managerial’ purpose of encouraging more L2 practice, a majority had a negative perception of L1. The school NET interviewed stated that this use of L1 is “*like a crutch which doesn’t push the student to try to communicate in English*”. This was echoed by another school NET who claimed that their role was to facilitate L2 practice and L1 interference “*is a huge distraction*”.

Attitudes towards the ‘Social/Cultural’ use of L1

For ‘social/cultural’ purposes such as increasing learner confidence, there was a slight majority with positive attitudes towards using L1. One school NET wrote on their questionnaire that in their mixed-ability classes, the use of L1 “*could help struggling students who might have no clue what is going on*”. The school NET interviewed said that many of their less proficient learners “*aren’t always bothered about keeping up with an English-only class*” so positively viewed the occasional use of L1 to help motivate them accordingly. Finally, there is a decisive consensus that the use of L1 is positively perceived by learners. One school NET commented that L1 can generate a positive atmosphere if learners can understand what is going on and “*not be out of their comfort zone*”. This view is supported by another school NET who wrote that learners “*feel comfortable knowing that they can make themselves understood by the teacher*”. Two private institution NETs claimed that some of their learners would positively perceive the use of L1, but the higher-level learners “*would prefer only using English as this is what they’re paying for*”.

CONCLUSION

1. To what extent is L1 used by NETs in EFL classes in the Greater Tokyo Area?

NETs do not use predominantly L1 in their classes to a great extent. This is least common in private institutions which reinforces the predominance of the strict monolingual principles of

‘The Direct Method’. NETs most commonly use L1 for ‘academic’ uses such as vocabulary translation which does not require long explanations in L1 and can be used as a time-saving measure. This shows that NETs use L1 as a pragmatic expediency. The limited use of L1 for other pedagogical purposes implies that it is a facilitative measure and only used wherever necessary and not to replace nor work conterminously with L2. Other ‘academic’ uses such as translating grammar are rarely used by NETs as their role is often to facilitate communicative activities in L2 and explaining grammar points to learners, especially in schools, is not necessary given their classes often focus on a solitary grammar point. For ‘managerial’ functions, NETs do not often use L1 for giving classroom instructions despite comments from participants that L1 expedites classroom management. For ‘social/cultural’ uses of L1, NETs mostly do not speak to learners outside of the classroom environment and rapport is built in L2. As well as the monolingual policy, this could be linked to the proficiency of NETs as less-able speakers of L1 may be more reluctant to converse in the mother tongue of their learners. With regards to the teaching policies of various institutions, NETs are seldom encouraged to use L1, nor are they commonly permitted to use L1, although the data shows that some teaching institutions are not as prohibitive as was previously assumed. This nevertheless shows that the monolingual approach is dominant throughout teaching institutions and further reinforces the view that the MEXT guidelines are being mostly followed in EFL classes in the Greater Tokyo Area.

2. What are the attitudes of NETs towards the use of L1 in EFL classes in the Greater Tokyo Area?

The overly positive attitudes towards the pedagogical use of L1 in EFL classes do not correlate with its limited usage nor the MEXT guidelines. This reiterates the predominance of monolingual principles and that the MEXT guidelines have large influence in EFL classrooms in the Greater Tokyo Area. This study further reinforces the perceived benefits of ‘academic’ uses of L1 in pragmatic ways such as translating vocabulary, especially nouns, as this utilises class time more effectively. Despite not using L1 to teach grammar, this approach is nevertheless positively perceived as it ensures comprehension and helps less-proficient learners stay on the same level as the more proficient learners. This indicates that learner ability is a factor which determines whether or not L1 is seen as a beneficial pedagogical approach. The comparative ambivalence towards ‘managerial’ uses indicates that L1 has less value in smaller classes for classroom management, but findings also indicated the needs of a particular class should be taken into consideration. Finally, the predominantly positive attitude towards ‘social/cultural’ uses indicates the existence of underlying cultural barriers to language acquisition such as making mistakes and saving face. This is due to the positive perception from NETs that L1 use is positively perceived by learners which suggests that L1 can help learners feel more comfortable in classes and may be more willing to participate. Perceived motivation is also affected by whether or not learners are compelled to participate in EFL classes as demonstrated by the findings given from private institution NETs whose learners pay for tuition of their own volition yet do not perceive the use of L1 as helping their motivation. The decisive consensus that using L1 discourages L2 practice suggests that the use of L1 is perceived as a facilitative measure only to be used either as a last resort, or to encourage less-proficient learners.

FUTURE AREAS FOR RESEARCH

This study was a general broad overview of the use and attitudes towards L1 pedagogy, however there are various future areas for research. The first area is to examine whether L1 pedagogy can improve learner proficiency which can be done via empirical grammar and vocabulary testing. Teaching dynamics could also be factored into this research as some NETs teach solo classes whereas other NETs teach alongside a non-native teacher which may or may not determine the level of L1 used by NETs. The second is to establish learner attitudes towards L1 pedagogy and whether there is a correlation between these and learner proficiency, and whether or not the attitudes from learners correlate with the attitudes of NETs. The third is to either expand the parameters of research by incorporating pre-school and elementary school NETs into the study, or focus instead on one specific teaching context such as university or school NETs and extrapolate more in-depth data.

Appendix A: Questionnaire Page 1

Nationality:					
Years of Teaching Experience:					
<i>For the following questions, please check or highlight all applicable boxes (more than one if necessary):</i>					
Teaching Qualifications:	BA Degree	MA Degree	PhD	CELTA/TESOL	Other
Current teaching level:	Pre-school	Elementary School	Junior/senior high school	University	Adult/various age groups
Teaching dynamic:	Solo teaching		Team-teaching with a Japanese teacher	Team-teaching with other NETs	
Average learner L2 level:	Beginner	Pre-Intermediate	Intermediate	Advanced	Mixed
Average class size:	1-6 learners	7-15 learners	16-30 learners	30-49 learners	50+ learners
Your Japanese ability:	Beginner	Pre-intermediate	Intermediate	Advanced	Native

Appendix B: Questionnaire Page 2

Section 1 – Using L1

(Note: L1 refers to the native language of the country in which you currently reside. Therefore, if you reside in Japan then the L1 will be Japanese etc.)

Please check the most suitable option.

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
To what extent do you generally use L1 in the classroom?					
To what extent do you use L1 in the classroom for translating vocabulary?					
To what extent do you use L1 in the classroom for explaining grammar?					
To what extent do you use L1 for classroom instructions?					
To what extent do you speak to learners in L1 outside of the classroom (within or outside of your institution)?					
To what extent does your working institution encourage you to use L1 with learners in or outside of the classroom?					
To what extent does your working institution permit you to use L1 with learners in or outside of the classroom?					

If possible, please elaborate with any further thoughts or comments relating to your answers:

Appendix C: Questionnaire Page 3

Section 2 – Attitudes Towards Using L1 in the Classroom

(Note: L2 refers to the non-native language that is being taught i.e. in Japan, English is an L2 etc.)

Please check the most suitable option.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
To what extent do you think that using L1 helps learners with vocabulary?					
To what extent do you think that using L1 helps learners with grammar?					
To what extent do you think that using L1 motivates learners?					
To what extent do you think that using L1 encourages more L2 practice?					
To what extent do you think that using L1 helps learners feel more confident in class?					
To what extent do you think that the use of L1 is positively perceived by your learners?					

If possible, please elaborate with any further thoughts or comments relating to your answers:

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.

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