Cultural Identity and Student Language Support in Oral Productive Tasks: Questioning the "Zero-Sum Game" Mentality

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Abstract

Research from a variety of frameworks suggests that appropriate use of first language can aid second language learning. However, researchers and professionals often assume that the use of student language is always bad and should therefore be reduced wherever possible. We conducted a simple experiment that suggests that the use of student language does not necessarily cut down on time spent speaking the target language. Spoken language production was tested in a variety of conditions both with and without first language support. There was no significant difference in the amount of target language produced. If these results are accepted, it is difficult to ignore the possibility that first

language use may be useful in second language acquisition by facilitating control in oral language production.

色んな分野の研究によると、適切な第一言語の利用が第二言語学習に役立つという可能性を示す。しかし、第一言語を利用することは疑いなく望ましくないと考えて、第一言語の利用を減らせば良いという仮説に第二言語学習の専門家がよくしがみつく。以下の研究では、第一言語を使っても、目標言語の利用時間と量が必ずしも減らないことを示唆する簡単な実験が行われた。第一言語サポートがあっても、目標言語の口語用法が減らないことが実際に観測された。この結果を受け入れたら、目標言語の用法をコントロールするために、第一言語が第二言語学習に役立つ可能性を無視することができない。

Introduction

Theoretical issues related to mental development, cultural psychology, linguistics, and second language acquisition all point to the need to embrace the optimal use of student language in second language pedagogy, rather than merely dismiss such usage as a necessary evil. A principled response is urgently called for. It is shown belown that proponents of all-English, immersion-style approaches to language teaching tend to make an unfounded assumption that student language necessarily and undesirably cuts into the time available for target language usage. We offer a cautious, preliminary investigation in a Japanese English conversation class asking whether L1 support has a place in the L2 classroom. Findings show that L1 support, while not statistically significantly different from L2 only support, has equally or slightly better outcomes than the L2 alone. These findings point the way to future research to determine the extent to which student language may be employed to stretch the interlanguage via oral productive tasks.

It is generally accepted that it is desirable to get students to speak

meaningfully in class (Gass & Selinker, 2008; Long, 1996). Even if this is disputed, many native speaker English teachers have the facilitation of meaningful oral production by students as the principal element of their job description and, hence, have little choice but to take it seriously. With regard to this, we wonder whether language teaching professionals may have lost sight of very straightforward possibilities regarding the use of important pedagogical tools in the English language classroom. Can the use of L1 support in the classroom, for example, help to optimize L2 oral output?

The use of L1 in language learning is the focus of heated debate in the field of second language acquisition. In recent years, increasing numbers of researchers have suggested that the rejection of L1 in language teaching methodology is unhelpful, paradoxically driven by self-interest, and often characterized as a form of colonialism (Pennycook, 1998; Phillipson, 1992). In response to this dynamic, there is a grudging acceptance in the field that it may be necessary to allow a

certain amount of L1 use, but that this should be limited to a certain arbitrarily determined percentage of low-quality classroom time or language use. We characterize this as the “zero-sum game” mentality.

We accept that English should, ideally, be the only language produced by teachers and students in oral communication classes, particularly as time is of the essence. We agree that maximum exposure to the target language is important (Cheng, 2013). However, ironically, there is a clearly manifest possibility that this may be most easily and effectively achieved with textual L1 support (perhaps in the form of handouts), in order to elicit oral responses. In other words, in spite of the observable tug-of-war between L1 and L2, we are not really playing a zero-sum or strictly competitive game (Binmore, 2007). It may well be, for example, that the perception that we are in a competitive situation creates a climate in which collaboration and cooperation between local and foreign native-speaker teachers becomes difficult. We see this preliminary study as important, therefore, in helping to rectify this

situation.

We see the reappraisal of L1 use in the context of a general questioning of global prescriptions based on theories of universality. In recent years, we have seen challenges to the Chomskyan (Chomsky, 1965) conception of language acquisition, in which the acquisition of language may be understood as the setting of abstract Universal Grammar parameters. This is often assumed to be achievable only by the exclusive employment of L2 in a "naturalistic" manner, and not amenable to normal processes of instruction. Recent work in Cognitive Linguistics, however, directly questions these fundamental assumptions. In this conception, language acquisition should be understood as a normal form of cognitive development. One might regard L2 competence, then, as being built upon L1 competence as learners struggle meaningfully to use the target language.

One should also note that usage-based conceptions of language learning owe a considerable debt to sociocultural theory (Lantolf, 2000;

Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). In this view, languages are learned in social activity, with L1 understood simply as one important cognitive tool to be employed in this process. We therefore seek to statistically analyze whether L1 input, used as a pedagogical tool, can help to elicit and facilitate L2 output compared to the exclusive use of the L2.

In turn, as sociocultural theory has become more important in second language acquisition (SLA), it becomes more difficult to reject the psychology of culture (Holliday & Aboshiha, 2009). Indeed, much of cultural psychology (Heine, 2011; Shweder, 1991) has actually developed as a branch of sociocultural theory (Nisbett, 2004). This forces us to ask whether methodology can ever be effectively adapted to local context unless cultural and psychological differences, of which student language is the most salient, are taken into consideration.

As the use of L1 is often seen as linked to “traditional” methodology, one might also identify an opportunity for research into SLA to desirably reconnect with a long-lost history of language learning

(Thomas, 1998) as well as close the gap between native and non-native speaker teachers. Finally, in identifying L1 as a research as well as a learning tool, one may hope that this form of inquiry will help to bridge the gap between research and practice (Block, 2000; Lantolf & Poehner, 2014).

Literature Review

Ecological, Context-Based Approaches

Many studies have recently suggested that it may be desirable to take a more holistic approach to language learning that takes student identity more seriously and locates the learner in local contexts. Dinsmore (1985) was early to note widespread failure in conversation classes. Bax (2003) identified problems as emanating from an ethnocentric dedication to methodology among native speaker teachers that leads them to ignore the local reality. According to Bax (2003),

people who have the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) mentality believe that the latest methods emanating from outside the localities are the only and complete solution, and that no local methods could possibly be any good. Given this perspective, the latest research carried out in western countries is accepted blindly even where clearly irrelevant to local conditions.

In this vein, Nayar (1989) suggests that an ethnocentric belief in universals may blind the native speaker English language teaching (ELT) professional to local sociocultural realities. Liu (1998) points to strong ethnocentrism among educators in western countries. Kumaravadivelu (2003) calls for an end to defensive cultural stereotypes employed by language teachers and researchers. Chen et al (2005) argue that the motivational model employed in monolingual ELT is divorced from local realities and unconnected to any true sense of student identity. Butzkamm and Caldwell (2009) claim that monolingual ELT often disintegrates into a farce as professionals unwittingly sabotage their own

efforts by rejecting student language as a useful tool, while local teachers overuse L1 to the detriment of communicative opportunities.

Harmer (2003) argues that we are now working in a post method phase (Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Pennycook, 1989; Prabhu, 1990) in which it is assumed that teaching methods must be adapted to the localities in order to improve practice in local contexts, as well as to address the problem of ethnocentric tendencies among teachers, discussed in Sower (1999). It seems unlikely that anyone today would seriously question the need for a rather flexible and inclusive approach regarding adaptation to local cultural realities.

The question of L1 use in pedagogical settings is fundamental to such an adaptation and there are signs that L1 use is indeed becoming the focus of effective adaptation to local context. Notably among recent investigations, Laviosa (2014) situates translation-based pedagogy within an ecological (Kramsch, 1993; van Lier, 2004) approach to language learning that values diversity over the search for universals

(Chomsky, 1972) and challenges the computational metaphor (Fodor, 1983) of language learning. As we ask fundamental questions regarding the nature of language acquisition and mental development in specific contexts, the role of L1 becomes unavoidably the center of focus.

Sociocultural Theory

Related to this movement, the development of sociocultural theory (ST) in language teaching (Lantolf, 2000) has intensified the need to understand the student as a cultural agent constructing knowledge within unique local environments. Warschauer (1997) argues that the sociocultural perspective on language learning was necessitated as a way of explaining how and why students collaborate through language. The influence of ST on language learning studies has grown to the point that Zuengler and Miller (2006) even talk about “two parallel SLA worlds,” the traditional “cognitive” and sociocultural approaches to research. The

reader should be aware that this distinction is muddied somewhat, as will hopefully become clear, by the fact that sociocultural theory has more in common with Cognitive Linguistics (broadly cognitive, while not assuming a dedicated language faculty) than it does with the mainstream generative tradition.

Sociocultural SLA theorists tend to avoid statistical experimentation in favour of descriptive analysis of actual dialogic exchanges in the microgenetic domain as participants engage in "tool-mediated goal-directed action" (Zinchenko, 1985, cited in Lantolf, 2000). The most important of the tools used to mediate activity is language. Startlingly, however, while the use of L1 as a pedagogical tool should be an unavoidable concern in sociocultural SLA, it has been largely ignored.

In consideration of the importance of student identities, it should also be pointed out that the growth of ST in SLA is a huge problem for those who would prefer to ignore the question of cultural differences

(Dash, 2003; Guest, 2002; Holliday & Aboshiha, 2009; Sowden, 2007). It is not simply that an understanding of cultural-historical psychology (Cole, 1998; Heine, 2011) is vital to an adequate understanding of sociocultural SLA (although this is also certainly true). The two areas of study are actually branches of the same field. Therefore, discouraging teachers from looking at the psychology of culture becomes increasingly unsustainable. To the extent that we accept a social dimension to language learning that sociocultural theory helps us to understand, it is difficult to see how ELT professionals can conveniently ignore the psychology of culture and the place of L1 within the sociocultural milieu. Similarly, to the extent that sociocultural SLA is a theory of tool-mediated mental development, it is also difficult to see how the field can ignore the issue of L1 use in language learning.

Cognitive Linguistics

From the perspective of ST, human ability to use language as a tool may be understood as a general function of relatively sophisticated cognitive abilities developed in the phylogenetic and sociocultural domains (Ellis, 2004; Tomasello, 2003). In this approach, there is no need for any specialized, innate language endowment (Chomsky, 1972). Rather, it is assumed that language emerged from human beings' uniquely evolved ability to identify as cultural agents with other human beings (Tomasello, 1999, 2010). In this sense, our theory of language dovetails with our theory of general mental development.

Just as the context-based movement in SLA pushes away from global prescriptions in ELT, emphasizing local diversity rather than global universals, ST sees mental development taking place in specific social activities. The study of linguistics has also made important moves in this direction. While mainstream linguistics has focused on the investigation of language-specific universals, Cognitive Linguistics (CL)

essentially rejects these. CL researchers (Evans, 2014; Goldberg, 1995; Lakoff, 1990) see language learning as a general cognitive developmental process of emergence within language usage (Bybee, 2010).

Indeed, the theory of language emergence owes a large debt to Vygotskyan theories of cognitive development. For example, work collected in Masuda et al. (Eds. 2015) point out that it might be helpful for researchers to utilize CL and ST together. Neguerela (2003) notes that ST is naturally allied with meaning- and usage-based theories of language. Lantolf and Poehner (2014) argue that CL and ST are a natural fit as CL offers a potentially formalized theory of language for ST's theory of educational development. One should notice that, as CL assumes that language ability emerges within usage, this must assume that L2 emerges, in at least some sense, from L1. Therefore, we might hypothesize that L1 could be a useful tool in stretching the interlanguage (Seedhouse, 1999) via elicitation and collaboration. One could argue,

then, that fundamental assumptions of CL indicate a pressing need and powerful opportunity to investigate how the use of L1 may facilitate oral productive tasks. As a major question for future research, L1 may be used to elicit usage in very specific and controlled ways. However, one could also argue that an investigation of L1 is equally relevant to the mainstream linguistic paradigm if it helps to drive desirable, meaningful usage of target expressions in L2.

Practical responses in SLA

There is evidence that teachers sometimes fail to maximize students' production of L2 (Butzkamm, 2011; Krashen, 1982; Macaro, 2001). Indeed, this has been a perennial source of bemusement and consternation among ELT professionals. McMillan and Rivers (2011, p. 256) note that the phenomenon of students who are not motivated to speak within an "English-only" context is sometimes dismissed as a

merely a matter of laziness or lack of motivation.

Where there is no common L1, often the situation in language learning courses in English as a second language (ESL) contexts, an "English-only" approach is virtually unavoidable (Auerbach, 1993). However, the perceived need to conduct the class entirely in L2 may lead to feelings of guilt (Auerbach, 1993; Hawkins, 2015). In such local situations, it may be that the presumed "ideal" of all-English usage massively and inevitably fails to match the reality. Levine (2003) argues that the struggle to deny use of L1 is both futile and a waste of valuable classroom time. Butzkamm (2011), while sympathetic to the plight of the all-English teacher, shows how the results can often be absurd.

On one hand, a principled use of L1 must be acceptable by definition (Cook, 2001; Hawkins, 2015; Macaro, 2011; Maher 2015; Vygotsky & Kozulin,1986) and could lead to better learning outcomes in the target L2 (Swain & Lapkin, 2013). On the other hand, teachers might

well overuse L1 (Butzkamm & Caldwell, 2009) in ways that are not principled and clearly deny students opportunities for interaction. This may lead authorities to defensively cling to unrealistic (McMillan & Turnbull, 2009) "English-only" policies, at least as general public guidelines. When such conditions are forced on local teachers who lack the knowledge, training, and support materials needed to teach in English-only, an untenable situation is likely to result. In these circumstances, L1 will likely be used in an *ad hoc* manner out of desperation (Kang, 2012).

One conservative response to this is to acknowledge that L1 must occasionally be used but that this undesirable use must be restricted in principle. This is the position taken by Sato (2015), citing Macaro (2011), where 20% L1 is arbitrarily chosen as the acceptable figure. There are a number of obvious problems with this "zero-sum" formulation. For example, instructions in textbooks are often given in L1. There is anecdotal evidence (personal communication) that L1 support is often

offered in handouts even in English immersion settings. If a teacher offers the same instructions in L2, is that counted as 100% L2 or must the L1 written input be factored in? Must L2 then be factored out as authentic, naturalistic use? There seems no principled reason to assume that L1 written input invalidates L2 oral output. Therefore, there seems no principled way to measure total L1 use against total L2 use.

This is hardly a minor quibble. A common criticism of translation or interpretation tasks is that they can be dry and dull. However, this need not necessarily be the case (Cook, 2010). L1 is certainly used to directly elicit L2 at the highest levels of language learning endeavor. For example, translation has been an object of study for millennia and has remained a normal method of language instruction at universities around the world (Malmkjaer, 2004). In both translation and interpretation, there is an obvious sense in which L2 output may increase with L1 input. Imagine an elite level student of L2 successfully carrying out a simultaneous interpretation of highly sophisticated L1 spoken input. The

choice between L1 or L2 clearly does not constitute a zero-sum game at this level of performance. It seems, then, that the desire to limit L1 input to a certain percentage of class time is based on a fallacious view of L1 that may actually have the paradoxical effect of limiting L2 output.

Many native speaker teachers of English are engaged in teaching speaking classes. These very teachers are likely to be the least adept at beneficially exploiting L1 use. Therefore, it seems reasonable to conjecture that the beneficial textual use of L1 may have been radically neglected in speaking classes.

Methods

A first, cautious step is to ask if L1 written input might be a useful tool in eliciting L2 oral output. Our experiment investigates this possibility while attempting to answer the following guiding question.

1. Can the use of written L1 support produce greater quantities of intelligible L2 oral output over L2 only support or no support when describing a picture?

Participants

This study consisted of (66) first year Japanese University students majoring in English. Students were placed in groups of three with mean TOEICs of 509 (SD 5.3). Each group of three were given three different pictures (fig 1) in three different conditions: L1 support, L2 support, or no support. Each picture included task instructions in L2. In addition, the students were shown a demonstration of the task by the instructor to minimize confusion as to what was expected from the task.

Task

The task involved students describing a picture to their group members in the L2. Before describing the picture, students were given five minutes to prepare a description of the picture. Students were allowed to prepare notes during this time that could be used during their 90 second oral description. This five-minute preparation period was carried out in silence, students kept their pictures hidden from view of their group members, and no outside tools were allowed (dictionary, internet connected device, previous notes). In addition, no collaboration between group members was allowed during any phase of the task. During the 90 second description period group members not describing the picture could not see the picture and were under instructions not to speak. In addition, at no time before or after the description were listeners allowed to ask questions about the picture being described.

Data Collection

Data for this study consists of the students' TOEIC scores, and audio recordings of the students' picture descriptions. TOEIC data was used to confirm generalized groups with similar TOEIC levels identified as A2/B1 on the Common European Framework of Reference. The audio data performed two roles. The first was to confirm that all descriptions were in the L2, and that the L1 was not used in any descriptive capacity. The second use was to measure the quantity and quality of the L2 output. This was accomplished by measuring the instances of "information packets" in each student's 90 second description of the task picture. An "information packet" is taken to be anything the student communicates in the target language which transmits information about the task picture which the listener can use to competently draw the task picture. This data was then analyzed for significance with a paired T-test to help in answering the research question.

Results

Table 1

Support Condition	English	Japanese	None
Mean	10.5	11.79	11.52
SD	3.46	3.02	2.67
TOEIC mean	503.33	513.57	510.48

Mean/SD refers to amount of "informational packets" in 90 second period.

With the data collected no significant difference was found between the three conditions. The English only groups mean of 10.5 (SD 3.46) compared to the Japanese only groups mean of 11.79 (SD 3.02) showed no significance, with a P value of P≤.3911 assuming significance at P≤.05. The groups with no support showed a mean of 11.52 (SD 2.67). When the no support condition was compared to the

English and Japanese support condition groups for significance, none was found, with ($P \leq .2626$) and ($P \leq .7558$) respectively.

Analysis

While the results show no statistical significance, they do show L1 support condition performing at the same level or slightly better than L2 support condition. A possibly more interesting finding relates to the groups with no support language. These groups had slightly better outcomes than groups with L2 support. This could be attributed to L2 interference, where the students were slowed/stymied in their descriptive efforts by the requirement to decode the L2 during the five-minute task.

Even though this study did not show that the L1 support condition was significantly better than the L2 support condition, it does suggest that L1 use in textual content is at least as useful as L2. The "zero-sum game" conviction, that the L1 restricts or detracts from L2 output was

not supported by this study. In fact, it opens the door to a more interesting inquiry into how the L1 could be better applied. Unwittingly it also shows that L2 support in some situations might hinder students' ability to speak in the L2. This could be very significant, particularly given likely practical considerations such as time restrictions and a wide range of student ability. The mean of 11.52 information packets in the no support condition, compared to 10.5 for English only, raises the possibility that the L2 might well hinder L2 oral production in certain situations. Such hindrance effects were not observed for L1 support even though these subjects were observed to be following the forms prescribed in the Japanese textual support.

Conclusion

These results would appear to clearly indicate that classroom language usage, be it L1 or L2, should not be characterized as a

zero-sum game. Further experimentation is required in order to determine optimal usage. One might urge greater communication between local and foreign native-speaker English teaching communities in order achieve better L2 outcomes for our students. We do not call for a wholesale use of L1 in the classroom, but a targeted approach to encourage greater elicitation of the L2. The L1 can and should be used just as any other classroom tool and, just as any other classroom tool, the goal should be to use it effectively while avoiding overreliance. Further research is urgently needed in order to determine optimal use of L1 in the L2 classroom. For example, to what extent can L1 textual support be employed to elicit targeted vocabulary and grammatical forms? Although this was not a focus of this study, evidence to support this was found inadvertently. Students in the L1 condition overwhelmingly produced the prescribed forms in the L2.

Teachers, both local and native-speakers, should be in a position to effectively use all available tools unencumbered by feelings of guilt.

Cognitive Linguistics suggests that L2 ability emerges in usage, built upon existing L1 ability. Closely related sociocultural theory encourages us to believe that effective tool-mediated social activity is crucial to mental development. Ecological, context-based approaches to language learning suggest that the use of L1 will play a crucial role in adapting methodology to local conditions. It may well be that the time has come for an honest reappraisal of targeted L1 use in SLA.

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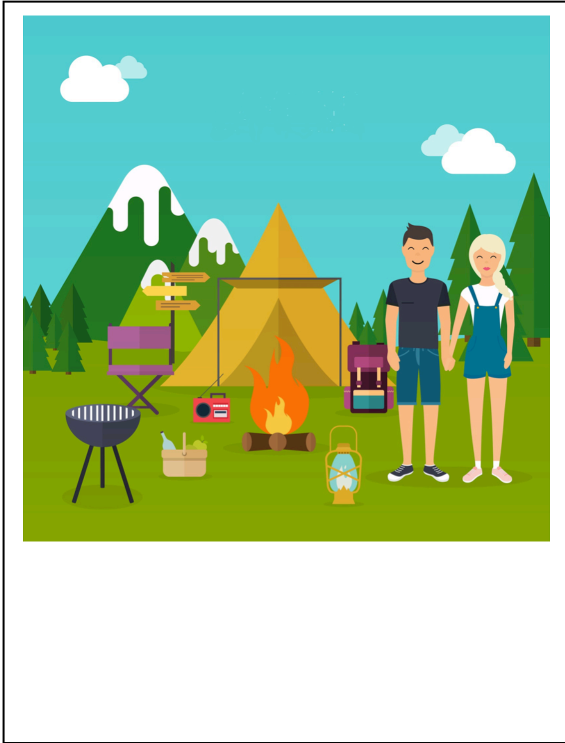
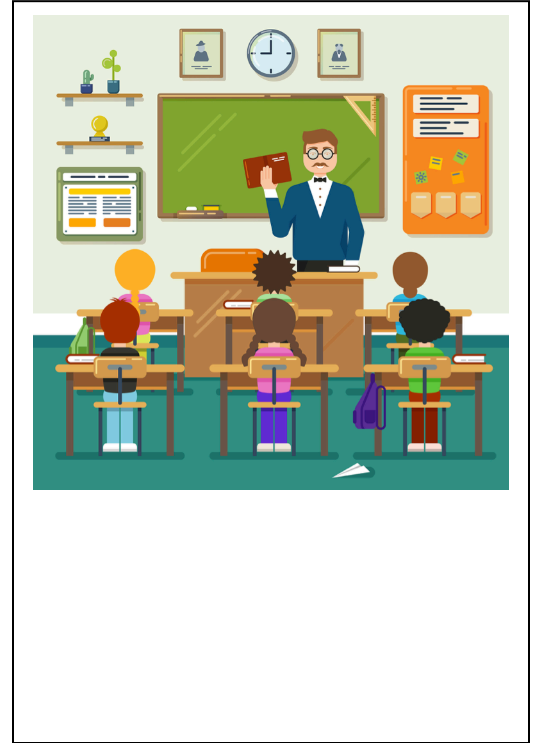
Figure 1





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