To What Extent Can We Allow Students to Use L1 in EDC?
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ABSTRACT
This paper will re-examine the role of L1 use in English Discussion Class (EDC) where it is encouraged to keep the ‘English only’ policy to both the instructors and students. The target student performance was observed over a period of three months during the spring semester 2013. One particular student showed his strong need to rely on L1 when undertaking activities and receiving feedback and instructions from the instructor. One can consider allowing the use of L1, only at the beginning of the course, if that brings benefit to learners, especially for students with a lower English competence and a lack of experience in putting themselves in an English only environment.

INTRODUCTION
Student performance will be the focal point of this essay, examining if L1 can be used effectively within the EDC programme. The student S’s performance, a male first year student from level 4 group, and as well as my reflections as an instructor, were recorded in my weekly teaching diary. In addition to this, with students’ consent, the second Discussion Test was videotaped in order to analyse the student interaction during a 16 minute discussion with peers. The placement TOEIC test score range of the level 4 group was from 175 (low) to 290 (high). The student S has received 175 (Listening: 115/ Reading: 60).

Firstly, I have to stress that I am not proposing to encourage students and instructors at EDC to use L1 when the students are capable of taking a lesson in English without an issue. Obviously, the use of L1 should be minimised in order to increase the amount of exposure to the target language. More importantly, one semester at Rikkyo proved to me that Rikkyo students who met the English requirement at the entrance examination were capable of conducting a 16 minute discussion, using the weekly function phrases in order to communicate with peers in L2. For a bilingual instructor, the English only policy can play an important role in the language classroom because this rule forces the students to communicate with peers and the instructor in English. The L1 use not only reduces the amount of time to practise L2, but it could also potentially remind students of the traditional teacher-centred classroom where students were expected to be more passive than what a communicative teaching classroom wills them to be.

However, one cannot expect a certain English competence in all students as some examination systems, such as the athlete recommendation system at this university, do not require an English language assessment. If we have a student who has difficulties in making a sentence, e.g. not knowing the meaning of basic words such as ‘interesting’ and ‘difficult’, should the instructor expect other students in the class to explain the word without using L1? In week 1, Student S, in particular, reacted negatively to the English only policy by saying in Japanese: “Our teacher does not understand that it is so hard to use English all the time”, whilst despondently looking down at the floor. From this moment, I have started questioning to what extent we should allow students to use L1.

Just like other current communicative language teaching classes at university (Cook, 2001), the learners’ L1 use in the classroom, in principle, is not encouraged in our programme. EDC aims to improve students’ discussion skills in English through the learner-learner interactions, and with which the students will be able to hold a 16 minute discussion without L1 use and any assistance and intervention by the instructor. Many studies have shown the benefit of negotiation of meaning between learners, which could have a positive effect on learning L2.
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(Pica, 1994). The goal of this paper is to describe the use of L1 by Student S and the change of his performance. A few suggestions of future teaching strategies and effective activities will be discussed in the last section of this paper.

DISCUSSION
1.1 The Student’s Initial Performance
My teaching journal has been kept since Week 1 when the first class of a level 4 group had clearly displayed a particularly problematic performance, namely the frequent use of L1. Student S required constant L1 assistance from his peers in order to get a handle on each activity. This initial performance, under the strict, English only policy, which I originally imposed, led to two challenges in managing the group, and they were as follows:

• **Time pressure:** The time for student activities was reduced due to the necessity of modification in my instructions, including paraphrasing and repetition.

• **Potential motivational issues for Student S and other students:** There seemed to be confusion and slight disappointment for some students when Student S required extra language assistance from both the instructor and classmates to have an English discussion. For Student S, my constant reminder of English policy made him shy away. Research has found that more male students negatively react to the only English classroom setting (Jones, et al., 2001).

Considering the fact that this is his first semester at the university, it was not an ideal situation if this discussion class became so overwhelming that Student S will lose his interest in learning English in the future. Thus some immediate changes were made to my teaching practice from the following week. In the first few lessons, I allowed students to use L1 to check their understanding if my instructions and activities were unclear. Longer preparation time was given before each activity so that Student S could fully comprehend what he was supposed to discuss in this time (Yuan and Ellis 2003). Some phrases that enabled students to negotiate the meaning were reviewed, such as: “How do you say ___ in English?”, “Sorry, I do not understand” and “Once more please”. The last phrase was suggested by Student S as a simpler version of “Could you say that again please”, which was listed in their course book. These modifications to my teaching practice seemed to work effectively as a new communication strategy to avoid L1 use during discussions in class proved successful.

My initial observation also showed that, for Student S, the level of the text, written only in the target language in the course book, had not matched with his current linguistic competence. To solve this problem, I decided to have a chat with Student S in L1, at the end of a class, to recommend him to skim through the textbook questions before each lesson. Although the impact of our quick talk on his linguistic development is not certain, I received a quite positive and pleasant response from Student S to my advice. He even asked me how I studied English, so our small talk, conducted in L1, regarding the language learning process, certainly helped create a positive rapport with him (Macaro, 2000a).

1.2 Limiting the Interlocutors to Avoid Communication Breakdown in L2
Discussion Test 1, in week 5, showed an unfavourable result of how students communicated with each other. It was clear, in the test, that all students were keen on sticking to L2 use exclusively and using the functions they learnt in the previous lessons. Thus, other peers hardly asked any follow up questions or for clarification when Student S’s comments were incomprehensible. However, I must say there was a constant friendly support (e.g. providing
positive comments, suggesting student S to use simple words, and using body gesture) from the group members to Student S whenever he was at a loss for words. The absence of code-switching might have compelled them to limit the interlocutors to avoid a communication breakdown. If so, this communication pattern needs to be improved as it is not ideal in language learning.

1.3 Several Potential Factors Which Motivated Student S to Practise the Target Language

Although Student S needed recourse to L1 (see Example 1 below) in discussing unknown language words (Knight, 1996), due to the familiarity of the discussion tasks and classmates, he seemed, week by week, to start building up his confidence, resulting in him making comments and getting involved in discussions (Plough and Gass 1993). For example, in Week 7, students learnt the phrases of “Joining a Discussion”, such as “Can I make a comment?” and “Can I ask a question?”. The function enabled Student S to actively participate in a discussion for the rest of the semester.

Example 1
Question: Is face-to-face communication sometimes better than email?

Student E: I do not agree with you (that emails are better than face-face communication)
Student S: Doyukoto? (English: What do you mean?)
Student E: The emotion does not send…
Student S: Tsutawaranai? (English: Email does not express our real feelings?)
Student E: yes yes”

The final observed lesson was Discussion Test 2 in Week 9. The videotaped discussion test showed frequent body gestures, by his peers, to be understood by Student S, which was seen as a compensation for a lack of linguistic knowledge. Apart from the 2 minute preparation time in L1, Student S did not require L1 assistance during the test. As seen in the Examples 2 and 3 below, Student S, despite the lack of accuracy of grammar, managed to give his opinion using the function phrases taught in class. The potential factor of his willingness to communicate actively in L2 came from the interactions with peers who constantly provided positive feedback and reactions. Student S requested clarification when he was unable to comprehend the lexical item “endure”, asking Student E to give an example. This, “Asking for example”, was also one of the function phrases introduced in Week 6. The knowledge, taught in the course, to negotiate the meaning helped Student S stay in the target language in the test.

Example 2
Question: Are Rikkyo students independent?

Student S: Can I comments?
Student E: Oh okay
Student S: Agree, agree, agree (pointing at each student)
Student E: oh thank you
Student S: so Rikkyo students...very independent...home alone...live alone..., so cooking, washing, clean...
Student N: Clean room (with body gesture)
Student S: Yes yes...very tired but smart...my smart...ryo...okay?
Student N: Nice comment  
Student S: Thank you

**Example 3**

Question: Is pressure bad for students?

Student E: Can I start? I think that pressure is not bad for students. If they reach a goal (using body language), they understand pressure – endure pressure. Do you understand?

Student N: Yes  
Student S: No no no no endure?

Student E: Hmn...  
Student S: For example? Please for example?

Student E: Hmn... not go to toilet... in class... okay?

Student S: Ahh! okay okay okay. Thank you.

**CONCLUSION**

The discussion on L1 use in a language classroom is debatable. For some teachers, L1 use does not bother them at all as long as L1 facilitates language learning. Yet, as a bilingual teacher, it is worthwhile to re-examine the necessity of an English only policy in a monolingual classroom from time to time. Of course, depending on where they will use the target language in the future, the code-switching habit amongst learners could be contentious for language development.

For future EDC activities for a student like Student S, the use of L1 could be considered in the discussion preparation activities if code-switching helps language learning. The topic and questions in the discussion preparation activity, in the course book, are closely connected with the discussion topic. Thus, if the learners are allowed to process the text and generate their own ideas in L1 if necessary, code-switching could prove highly useful in students learning an L1-L2 equivalent, which would consequently minimise L1 use in discussions 1 and 2. Alternatively, some vocabulary cards could be prepared in advance for the lexically complex items that students might not know. Students could quickly check the meaning upon request. It is implausible to define how much use of L1 is ‘too much’ in class. Further formal observation and research will be required to measure the effect of L1 use or absence of L1 use on developing discussion skills.

**REFERENCES**


New Directions in Teaching and Learning English Discussion