

EFL Students' Choice of Language for Individual Conferencing

Yusa Koizumi, Yoko Kobayashi

Introduction

As communicative teaching approaches gained popularity and became a norm in second language (L2) classrooms around the world, the role expected of teachers shifted to that of a facilitator, who prepares an environment in which students can receive plenty of L2 input and communicate with each other in L2. In this environment, the use of students' first language (L1) needs to be avoided or minimized because it deprives them of opportunities to use L2. In recent years, however, theorists have begun to argue for the positive roles of L1 in L2 learning. They view L1 as a cognitive tool that helps students process L2 input, develop ideas, and make L2 output (Scott & de la Fuente, 2008). Some claim that L1 can also be functional in communicative learning contexts, such as pair or group work. Using L1 as a metalanguage, students can notice problematic L2 items in their output, discuss them, and modify them into more targetlike forms (Storch & Aldosari, 2010; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003; Swain & Lapkin, 2000). For sociocultural theorists, language mediates cognitive activity in the social domain, thereby promoting development. When students interact with teachers or other students, they receive scaffolded help and complete tasks that they cannot complete alone. Language also mediates private speech, helping students externalize and share their thoughts with others (Alegría de la Colina & García Mayo, 2009; Anton & Dicañilla, 1999; Storch, 2013). Although both L1 and L2 can perform these functions, sociocultural theorists see the advantages of L1 in this respect.

Recognizing the positive roles of L1 has led researchers to seek ways to incorporate it into L2 lessons. They believe that this can be done without violating the principles of communicative teaching approaches. Cook (2001) claims that "the maximal provision of L2 input does not deny the L1 a role in learning and teaching," and "having a large amount of meaningful L2 use . . . does not preclude using the L1" (p. 410). Based on this notion, some researchers propose that L2 teachers strategically incorporate students' L1 into their instruction. For example, Cook (2001) advises teachers to use L1 for conveying vocabulary meaning, explaining grammar, organizing tasks, and providing individual feedback. The researcher argues that students should be viewed as bilinguals, in whose mind two languages coexist, and code-switching and translation should have a place in classroom activities. Based on a large-scale survey of foreign language teachers and students, Levine (2003) has formulated three tenets for L2 instructors: (a) recognizing positive roles of L1 in L2 learning, (b) creating classroom sit-

uations in which L1 can perform these roles, and (c) helping students manage their use of L1 and L2 in the classroom.

Literature Review

Based on the L1's potential as a facilitator of L2 development, researchers have investigated how students perceive the use of L1 in L2 classrooms. One line of research has focused on L2 classrooms in which teachers regularly employ students' L1. These studies aimed to find students' views on the teachers' L1 use through questionnaires and interviews. Conducted in various contexts, including university EFL courses in Korea (Macaro & Lee, 2013) and Mexico (Brooks-Lewis, 2009), as well as university foreign language courses in the U.S. (Bruen & Kelly, 2017; Rolin-Ianziti & Varshney, 2008) and Turkey (Ekmekçi, 2018), these studies generally reported positive reactions from students. Students found their teachers' code-switching useful for understanding instructions and getting information about exams and assignments. They also saw L1's benefits in learning new vocabulary and complex grammar. In addition, they considered L1 as a stress reliever that eases their anxiety and makes them more active in the classroom. One study revealed that adult students viewed L1 as a means to contribute to lessons with their prior knowledge and experience (Brooks-Lewis, 2009).

At the same time, students in these studies were aware of the risks of overusing L1 in L2 classes. They feared that teachers' excessive L1 use would reduce the amount of L2 input they receive, which many believed to be detrimental to learning (Bruen & Kelly, 2017; Macaro & Lee, 2013; Rolin-Ianziti & Varshney, 2008). The students also worried that teachers' switching to L1 would prompt them to respond in L1, thereby decreasing their chances of using L2 (Macaro & Lee, 2013). In fact, one study conducted in L2 Spanish courses at a U.S. university found that teachers initiated more code-switches than students, and teachers' code-switching often triggered students' responses in L1, resulting in an increased amount of L1 use in the class (Thompson & Harrison, 2014). In another study, students expressed mixed feelings about the affective roles of L1. While they were aware that L1 could lower their stress level and help them build relationships with their teacher and classmates, they believed that the abuse of L1 would make them overly relaxed and disrupt their concentration and motivation (Rolin-Ianziti & Varshney, 2008). In relation to this, a large-scale online survey conducted in North America revealed that students' anxiety in lessons taught exclusively in L2 was lower than teachers expected (Levine, 2003).

Another line of research investigated the purposes of students' L1 use during L2 tasks through posttask questionnaires and interviews. In a study conducted in Australia, ESL students reported that they used L1 for defining vocabulary and explaining grammar when they worked with partners who spoke the same L1. The students also reported using L1 for negotiating their linguistic choices (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003). In this study, students were generally hesitant to use L1, claiming that the

process of translating would slow down their work. However, they admitted that they could have completed the tasks more successfully if they had used L1 to deepen their understanding or discuss their choices thoroughly. In a similar study conducted in L2 French and English courses in Mexico, students reported employing L1 to clarify the task, find the meaning of unfamiliar words, and figure out complex grammar (Mora Pablo et al., 2011). Although many students found these uses helpful in relieving the stress caused by non-understanding, the minority voiced their concern that overuse of L1 would deprive them of the opportunity to learn L2.

Thus, previous studies have shown that L2 students generally have positive views on teachers' switching to L1 when they explain tasks, assignments, vocabulary meaning, or complex grammatical rules. Students themselves switch to L1 for similar purposes while working with each other. Previous research has also revealed that students have concerns about the danger of excessive code-switching, namely, leading to further L1 use and preventing their learning. These concerns presumably originated from their belief that L2 is learned through being exposed to a large amount of input and producing a large amount of output (Levine, 2003; Macaro & Lee, 2013).

However, most studies on this topic focused on L1 use during lessons or tasks in which L2 is the primary language of instruction or interaction. In these contexts, teachers and students employ L1 only temporarily to fulfill particular purposes. In formal educational settings, students rarely have a choice of the medium language for an entire lesson or activity. One exception may be individual conferencing with teachers. This activity has gained popularity in L2 teaching, especially in the teaching of writing, as a means for teachers to provide individual instruction and feedback more directly and interactively than in the written form (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014). In these conferences, students are normally given a high degree of autonomy: They are encouraged to identify problems in their own work, lead the discussion with the teacher, and negotiate solutions. In EFL contexts, in which students and teachers often share an L1, students' autonomy at individual conferences may include selecting the medium of interaction. The present study investigated EFL students' language choice in individual conferencing, aiming to find which language (English or their L1) they select for what reasons.

Method

The Participants and the Program

Eight EFL classes at a small private university in Tokyo participated in the study. This university has a college-wide English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program in which students develop the necessary skills to participate in university life fully. The program is required for first-year students, who are divided into four levels depending on their English proficiency: Level 1 has students whose TOEFL ITP scores are approximately above 600; Level 2 has students whose scores range between

550 and 600; Level 3 between 450 and 550; and Level 4 between 350 and 450. Of the eight classes that participated in the study, six were Level 3, and two were Level 4. Each class had around 20 students.

The EAP program has dual goals of developing English language skills and nurturing basic critical thinking and study skills. These skills are essential at the university, where courses are taught in Japanese and English. The program consists of a variety of courses focusing on specific English skills while supporting critical thinking and academic skills development. The data for the study were collected in a reading course, which aims to develop students' intensive reading and text analysis skills using authentic academic texts. Students enroll in the reading course for three terms over a year and complete several assignments each term. Most of the assignments involve writing as well as reading, requiring students to paraphrase or summarize texts or write an essay using information in a text.

While being the subject of the courses, English is designated as the medium of instruction in the EAP program. All the courses in the program are taught in English, based on the belief that the more students are exposed to the target language, the better their comprehension and production skills will become. The reading course is usually taught by native speakers of Japanese, with the rationale that their knowledge of Japanese and experience as EFL learners will help students comprehend and analyze authentic texts. They generally observe the program's policy and seldom use Japanese in class. However, there can be instances in which the use of Japanese is allowed, for example, when teachers ask students to explain concepts in a text. Some reading teachers find the occasional use of Japanese effective for facilitating students' critical thinking. The six Level 3 classes and the two Level 4 classes that participated in the study had different teachers for the reading course, both of whom were native speakers of Japanese.

There is one situation outside class in which EAP teachers may use Japanese. It is individual conferencing, which is incorporated into most of the courses in the program, including the reading course. The main purpose of individual conferencing in the reading course is for students to ask questions about assigned texts and confirm their understanding. Students can request a conference whenever they have questions, but they are strongly advised to have one when they have important assignments. Individual conferences are generally conducted in English, but teachers may switch to Japanese when they consider it necessary or effective or when students ask for it.

Procedure

To investigate EAP students' preference for the medium language of individual conferences and reasons for the preference, a written questionnaire was developed based on previous studies (Appendix). The first two questions asked students to report their first language and the language (English or Japanese) they used for their conference. These questions were followed by a list of eight items stating different reasons for selecting the language. Students were to choose any number of items

from this list or specify any other reason. The questionnaire was written in English and Japanese, and students were asked to write any comments in either language.

The questionnaire was administered in the second and third terms over the 2-week period in which each class had individual conferencing sessions. The sessions were all held in the teacher's office, following the schedule the teacher had prepared. Each student was given 10 to 15 minutes to discuss the assignment they were working on. At the beginning of a session, the teacher explained that the student had a choice of the language for the session and asked them to select English or Japanese. After the student made a choice, the teacher used that language exclusively. At the end of the session, the teacher handed a copy of the questionnaire and asked the student to complete it outside the office and leave it in a box. The teacher also informed students that responding to the questionnaire is not obligatory and asked them to remain anonymous in the questionnaire.

Results

The majority of students selected their L1, Japanese, as the medium language for their conference: Of the total 97 students who responded to the questionnaire, 64 (66%) chose to use Japanese while 33 (34%) chose to use English. Among students who selected Japanese, the most common reason was Item 1, "I can say what I want to say more clearly," which was chosen by 95% of those students, followed by Item 2, "I can understand what the teacher says more clearly," which was chosen by 70%, and Item 7, "I can feel more relaxed," which was chosen by 56%. Of the 33 students who decided to use English, 29 (88%) chose Item 5, "I can practice speaking English," as a reason. The second most common reasons were Item 3, "I can understand the text better," and Item 6, "I can learn

Table 1 *Reasons for Choosing L1 or L2*

	L1 (Japanese) <i>n</i> = 64	L2 (English) <i>n</i> = 33
1. I can say what I want to say more clearly.	61 (95%)	2 (6%)
2. I can understand what the teacher says more clearly.	45 (70%)	5 (15%)
3. I can understand the text better.	23 (36%)	15 (45%)
4. I can use the time more efficiently.	30 (47%)	4 (12%)
5. I can practice speaking English.	0 (0%)	29 (88%)
6. I can learn English expressions more effectively.	1 (2%)	15 (45%)
7. I can feel more relaxed.	36 (56%)	2 (6%)
8. I can concentrate better.	20 (31%)	10 (10%)
9. Any other reason	6 (9%)	9 (27%)

English expressions more effectively,” which were selected by 45% of the students, respectively (Table 1).

Students' preference for L1 was seen across proficiency levels: 46 (66%) of Level 3 students and 18 (67%) of Level 4 students opted to use Japanese for their conference. In both subgroups, the most common reason for using Japanese was Item 1, “I can say what I want to say more clearly,” which was chosen by 96% of Japanese users at Level 3 and 94% of Japanese users at Level 4. However, the second and third most common reasons slightly differed. In the Level 3 subgroup, Item 2, “I can understand what the teacher says more clearly,” was the second most common reason, and Item 7, “I can feel more relaxed,” was the third most common reason. On the other hand, in the Level 4 subgroup, Item 7 was the second most common reason, and Item 4, “I can use the time more efficiently,” was the third most common reason (Table 2).

Table 2 *Reasons for Choosing L1 (Japanese), by Proficiency Level*

	Level 3 <i>n</i> = 46	Level 4 <i>n</i> = 18
1. I can say what I want to say more clearly.	44 (96%)	17 (94%)
2. I can understand what the teacher says more clearly.	36 (78%)	9 (50%)
3. I can understand the text better.	15 (33%)	8 (44%)
4. I can use the time more efficiently.	19 (41%)	11 (61%)
5. I can practice speaking English.	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
6. I can learn English expressions more effectively.	1 (2%)	0 (0%)
7. I can feel more relaxed.	23 (50%)	13 (72%)
8. I can concentrate better.	14 (30%)	6 (33%)
9. Any other reason	3 (7%)	3 (17%)

A similar tendency across levels was found for the reasons to choose L2. At both levels, the most common reason was Item 5, “I can practice speaking English,” selected by 88% of Level 3 students who decided to use English and 89% of Level 4 students who made the same decision. However, the two subgroups varied in the second and third most common reasons. At Level 3, the second most common reason was Item 3, “I can understand the text better,” and the third most common reasons were Item 6, “I can learn English expressions more effectively,” and Item 8, “I can concentrate better.” However, the number of students who selected these items was much smaller than the number of students who selected Item 5, making Item 5 by far the most common reason. At Level 4, the

difference between the most common reasons was much smaller: The second most common reason, Item 6, was chosen by 78% of students in this subgroup. The third most common reason was Item 3, selected by 44% (Table 3).

Table 3 *Reasons for Choosing L2 (English), by Proficiency Level*

	Level 3 <i>n</i> = 24	Level 4 <i>n</i> = 9
1. I can say what I want to say more clearly.	2 (8%)	0 (0%)
2. I can understand what the teacher says more clearly.	3 (13%)	2 (22%)
3. I can understand the text better.	11 (46%)	4 (44%)
4. I can use the time more efficiently.	2 (8%)	2 (22%)
5. I can practice speaking English.	21 (88%)	8 (89%)
6. I can learn English expressions more effectively.	8 (33%)	7 (78%)
7. I can feel more relaxed.	2 (8%)	0 (0%)
8. I can concentrate better.	8 (33%)	2 (22%)
9. Any other reason	6 (25%)	3 (33%)

Discussion

Reasons for Using L1 or L2

The reasons for using L1 in the present study are largely in line with previous studies investigating students' views on L1 use. Common reasons included better comprehension and relaxation, which students in previous studies recognized as benefits of incorporating L1 into L2 classes (Brooks-Lewis, 2009; Bruen & Kelly, 2017; Macaro & Lee, 2013; Rolin-Ianziti & Varshney, 2008). However, the most common reason in the present study, to express oneself more clearly, was not reported in previous studies as an advantage of L1 or a reason for using L1. This inconsistency may be explained by different research contexts. Most previous studies were situated in teacher-led lessons, in which the instructor lectures to an entire class and controls classroom activities. In such contexts, most communication is initiated and led by the teacher, with students assuming the role of the listener. For students in these contexts, L1 is primarily an aid for comprehension: If the teacher uses L1, students can understand instructions better and relieve any stress from non-understanding. In contrast, the present study was situated in individual conferences, in which students have to take the role of the speaker. In fact, students in the study were expected to perform a more comprehensive role: They had to lead the session, explaining their problems, proposing solutions, and negotiating the solutions

with the teacher. Given the challenges they confronted, it is not surprising that two out of three students opted for L1. It should also be noted that the need to understand the teacher and the need to ease anxiety could also be greater in one-on-one conferences than in classroom situations because of the different role students assume.

The most common reason for selecting L2 was to gain an opportunity to practice the language, and this result also supports previous studies. Many of the studies reviewed earlier investigated programs that designated L2 as the primary means of classroom communication but did not exclude occasional switches to L1 by teachers and students. These studies found that some students consider the L2-L1 switching a threat to their learning because it deprives them of opportunities to hear or speak L2 (Bruen & Kelly, 2017; Macaro & Lee, 2013; Rolin-Ianziti & Varshney, 2008). The present study investigated a context in which students designated the medium of communication. In this context, students can gain opportunities to practice L2 by choosing to use it. Thus, despite being conducted in a different context, the present study revealed the same desire of L2 students as previous studies, namely, to maximize the chance to practice the language they are learning. As commented in previous studies, behind this desire is the belief that languages are best learned through practice and use (Levine, 2003; Macaro & Lee, 2013). The present study suggests that this belief is shared by university EFL students in Japan.

Reasons Common to L1 and L2

Interestingly, students selected some items in the survey as reasons for choosing L1 and reasons for choosing L2 with equal frequency. One example was Item 3, "I can understand the text better." Based on previous studies, it had been assumed that this item would mainly be a reason for using Japanese, and it was actually selected by 36% of Japanese users. However, the item was also selected by 45% of English users. This may be attributed to the fact that the text was in English. One student wrote in response to Item 9 (any other reason), "It is easier to talk in English because the text is in English and the teacher always explains it in English in class." Another wrote, "It is troublesome to translate the text into Japanese each time." These comments indicate that discussing L2 texts in L1 may pose an extra cognitive burden on students, slowing down the conference rather than facilitating it. This may also account for the result that 12% of English users chose Item 4, "I can use the time more efficiently," as a reason for using the language.

Another example was Item 8, "I can concentrate better," which was chosen by 31% of students who opted for Japanese and 10% of those who opted for English. These findings are reasonable because L2 acquisition theory and previous studies suggest that it can be a valid reason for using L1 or L2. Based on cognitive accounts of L2 acquisition, it is presumed that students can concentrate more effectively in L1. When students process L2 input or produce L2 output, they need to focus on the

meaning and form simultaneously. This places a heavy load on their cognition, and when the meaning takes up too much space, they cannot allocate enough resources to the form, or vice versa (VanPatten, 1990). In L1, the same process requires less cognitive space, and therefore, students can concentrate more effectively on both. On the other hand, the literature on students' views on L1 use suggests that they can concentrate better in L2. Students in these studies feared that L1 might make them overly relaxed and distract their attention (Rolin-Ianziti & Varshney, 2008). They also used L1 for socializing with classmates, which might take a toll on their concentration (Mora Pablo et al., 2011). An additional factor unique to the present study is that the EFL program designated English as the classroom language, and thus most students had never spoken Japanese with the instructor. Some students hesitated to use Japanese for the conference because of this. In response to Item 9, one student wrote, "Because I usually use English to communicate with the teacher, I thought it would be awkward to talk with her in Japanese, and it would make it difficult for me to concentrate." A comment from another student read, "I thought it would be strange to use Japanese with someone I always talk to in English."

Level 3 vs. Level 4

As reported in the previous section, students at Level 3 and Level 4 did not considerably differ in the percentage of those who opted for L1 or the reasons for their choice. This may relate to the fact that students at the two levels were generally homogeneous in terms of English learning environment: The majority were born and raised in Japan and studied English as a foreign language in the Japanese school system. The result suggests that, in a typical EFL environment like this, students' attitudes toward English learning do not widely vary according to proficiency level.

However, despite the general trend, interesting differences were found between Level 3 and Level 4. One relates to the reasons for using L1. Among Level 4 students, Item 4 (efficient use of time) and Item 7 (relaxation) were common reasons for using Japanese, chosen by 61% and 72%, respectively, of those who selected the language. However, at Level 3, only 41% and 50% of Japanese users selected these items. For Level 3 Japanese users, Item 2 (better comprehension), selected by 78%, seemed to be a more important reason. This difference can be attributed to their diverse attitudes toward individual conferencing. Less confident in their speaking skills, Level 4 students were more likely to be afraid of wasting time because of their disfluency. They were also more likely to be nervous about having to talk to the teacher one on one. These psychological factors presumably made Items 4 and 7 more important reasons to use Japanese for Level 4 students. These concerns applied less to Level 3 students, who were more competent in speaking English. Level 3 students were faced with other kinds of difficulties: They had to deal with more complex texts and more challenging assignments than Level 4 students, and their teachers were less likely to modify the language they

used than Level 4 teachers. These difficulties probably generated a need to comprehend the teacher clearly and motivated Level 3 students to use Japanese to meet the need.

An interesting difference was also found in the reasons for choosing L2. Item 6, "I can learn English expressions more effectively," was the second most common reason at Level 4, chosen by 78% of English users in this group. Although this item was the third most common reason for Level 3 English users, the rate was much lower (33%). This result indicates that less proficient students view individual conferences as an extra opportunity for vocabulary learning, not merely a place to receive feedback and resolve problems in their assignments. The result provides additional evidence that university students in Japan believe that being exposed to a large amount of input is essential for L2 learning and implies that this belief might be stronger among less proficient students. With lower-level students, instructors are more likely to simplify their speech, and thus, an individual conference is an ideal situation for them to receive comprehensible input and pick up useful expressions contained.

Summary

This small-scale study investigated EFL students' choice of language for individual conferencing. The results indicate that EFL students prefer to use L1 for discussing assignments with their teacher one on one, mainly to express themselves clearly and understand the teacher correctly. The results also indicate that students who prefer L2 are likely to view individual conferences as extra opportunities to practice the target language and learn new expressions. Although proficiency may not affect the general tendency, the study suggests that variations in teaching materials, teaching styles, and students' attitudes across proficiency levels may result in differences in the reasons for selecting L1 or L2.

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Appendix: Questionnaire

1. Is Japanese your first language (mother tongue)? 日本語はあなたの第一言語(母語)ですか？

Yes No (Please circle. どちらかに○をつけてください)

2. Which language did you choose to use in today's tutorial? 今日のチュートリアルではどちらの言語を選択しましたか？

English Japanese (Please circle. どちらかに○をつけてください)

3. Why did you choose the language? なぜその言語を選びましたか？

(Check the reasons that apply to you. You may check two or more reasons. 自分にあてはまる理由にチェックをつけてください。複数回答可)

I can say what I want to say more clearly. 自分の言いたいことをより明確に表現できるから

I can understand what the teacher says more clearly. 先生の言っていることをよりよく理解できるから

I can understand the text better. テキストの内容をよりよく理解できるから

I can use the time more efficiently. 時間を効率よく使うことができるから

I can practice speaking English. 英語を話す練習になるから

I can learn English expressions more effectively. 英語の表現を効果的に学べるから

I can feel more relaxed. よりリラックスできるから

I can concentrate better. より集中できるから

Any other reason その他の理由 (Please specify in English or in Japanese. 英語または日本語で具体的に書いてください)