Research Notes on Teaching English in English

FUKUSHIMA   Mieko

Teaching English in English: Is it becoming a common practice?

An innovative phase of English language teaching has been set up by Japan's Education Ministry.   It can be characterized by a curricular focus placed on the development of communicative competence and the government's strategic plan to educate Japanese people to be able to use English more effectively.   The latter plan was presented by the Round Table on English Language Education Reform in its July 2002 report.   Among the elements included in this scheme are the Super English Language High School project (SELHi) and English conversation activities to be enhanced in primary schools.   It is reasonable to assume in this situation that Japanese school teachers of English are expected to have formidable competence in English to be able to use the language effectively.

How many current Japanese teachers of English are teaching English in English?   Several years ago, in 1998, a special section entitled "Eigo de jugyo o susumeyo" (Let's conduct instruction in English) was presented in the April issue of The English Teacher's Magazine (a well-known monthly collection of teachers' essays and articles published in the Japanese language by Taishukan).   In this section six secondary school teachers and one university faculty member talk about teaching in English within the framework of their own classroom instruction.   No statistical data is available regarding the extent to which this has become common practice among Japanese teachers of English engaged in secondary education.   However, the presence of such a special section in a well-known magazine seems to be an indication that a fairly large number of Japanese teachers of English are now positive about using English in the classroom.

My personal observations of some groups of secondary teachers in my local area go along with this assumption on teachers' positive attitudes towards using English in the classroom.   Open classes at the high schools conducting SELHi projects showed the teachers' efforts to conduct their instruction in English all the time.   Also, the prefecture board of education in this region encourages secondary school teachers of English to conduct their instruction in English.   In addition, I have attested, in a study group of Japanese teachers of English, individual teachers' efforts to use English in the classroom.   In this group I occasionally find some young teachers of English in their twenties or thirties who appear to be more fluent in English than the average older generations.

In the early Meiji Period, Kasuya (in Horiguchi 2001) notes, there were two types of English language teaching: "Seisoku Eigo" (regular English teaching), which was conducted in English by native-speaking

teachers, and "Hensoku Eigo" (irregular English teaching), which was offered by Japanese teachers through the medium of Japanese.   According to Kasuya, the former focused on the sound aspect of English and conversation, whereas the latter focused on oral reading with reference to Japanese phonetic alphabet and reading comprehension through translating.   He adds that there were few Japanese teachers in those days who were able to teach the level of sound in English.   I personally hold the view that, in a collective sense, Japanese teachers, students, and people in the society, have not totally been liberated from the dichotomy suggested by the "Seisoku" versus "Hensoku" contrast, between English-medium instruction by native-speaking teachers and Japanese-medium lessons by Japanese teachers.   If this is the case, it may sound odd to teachers in educational institutions where teaching English in English has been taken for granted or has been set up as a policy.   As for the state of current Japanese school teachers of English, however, the following translated version of the remarks given by Akaike (a presenter in the above mentioned section of the 1998 April issue of the English Teacher's Magazine) might represent the feelings of many teachers: "Although everybody thinks it's better to teach in English, it is very hard, but we should do it since we are teachers of English."   There may be a lengthy period of time lying ahead until all Japanese teachers of English in this country can use English well enough not only to teach their students but also to enjoy communicating with them in and outside the classroom.

The teacher's determination to use English in the classroom is one matter.   Akaike (1998) continues: "Once we think we should teach in English, we'd better start doing it as soon as possible."   It is another matter whether the teacher can use English in the classroom well enough and also in a principled manner.   One problematic feature of the presentation of some in-service teachers I have met is a frequent language switch between English and Japanese during a lesson.   Further, as will be mentioned later in these notes, there seem to be certain classroom contexts in which the teacher considers usefulness of the mother tongue or the need for it.

Why teach through English?

The idea of teaching a foreign language through the medium of the language being taught is not innovative.   The major methodologies of foreign language teaching, as described by Richards and Rodgers (1986), mostly assume the teacher's target language use in the classroom, whether exclusively, as in the Direct Method and the Audiolingual Method, or in a weak form, as in the more recent approaches collectively called Communicative Language Teaching.   As stated by Finocciaro and Brumfit (1983, cited in Richards and Rodgers 1986), Communicative Language Teaching would not totally reject the use of the mother tongue.   "Judicious use of native language is accepted where feasible" (1986: 67-68).   An exception is what was regarded in Richards and Rodgers (1986) as the most traditional method, namely, the Grammar-Translation Method, which values the learning of the target language through the medium of the mother tongue.   In addition, Community Language Teaching and Suggestopedia use translation as a useful element of teaching.

In the field of primary English teaching, which has gained world-wide attention recently, there seem to be no such claims for the teacher's extensive use of the mother tongue, except for the awareness model

described by Johnstone (1994).   What is found in the literature is that one of the key issues is whether one holds a strong-form claim for the teacher's use of the target language, as in Curtain and Pesola (1994), or a week-form claim which allows for an insertion of mother tongue use, as in Satchwell (1999).   Satchwell suggests offering a five- or ten-minute deliberate mother tongue session, either for pupils to sort out their problems or for the teacher to explain cultural things.   It is important to note here that this idea of Satchwell is not about a language switch possibly made in a rather haphazard manner by a teacher who is not proficient in English.

Why is it necessary to teach in the target language?   Halliwell (1992), who is concerned with teaching English to primary school students, discusses these three advantages: 1) enhancing the children's ability to predict meaning and their own trust in it; 2) cultivating the sense of language as something being used for real communication; and 3) offering more exposure to the target language.   The last issue, namely, the importance of input provision by the teacher is also discussed by Slattery and Willis (2001).   The importance of these effects on students should also apply to secondary English teaching.

Factors affecting the teacher's language in the classroom

The teacher's target language use cannot be realized in an abstract form.   Moon (2000) considers several factors which might make it hard for the teacher to use English all the time, such as the teacher's own proficiency and confidence and pupils' proficiency and motivation.   I tentatively discuss this matter from the viewpoints of the teacher's proficiency in English, the teacher's negative views on using English in the classroom, and the teacher's considerations of classroom factors.

(1) Teacher proficiency

A proverb says, "Rome was not built in a day."   If the teacher is not very fluent and competent in English, his or her maturity as a user of English is necessary.   Fluency, however, does not guarantee that the teacher can offer effective instruction, and maturity as a teacher in general terms and as a teacher of English in particular is needed.

In my view, it is important to consider whether Japanese society is supportive enough for Japanese teachers of English to develop their proficiency in English.   In a group discussion presented in a special issue of the English Teachers' Magazine (January 2000), Oka suggests including an overseas study program in the undergraduate teacher's certificate programs in English.   Another member of this discussion session, Niisato, mentions recent developments of in-service training such as an expansion of the thorough English-medium training which was initially conducted at Tsukuba University and the overseas programs offered by the government for a total of one-hundred and fifty in-service teachers.   As Niisato points out, these are not enough in light of the total of more than sixty thousand teachers of English in this country.

"Rome was not built in a day" may also apply to the development of the teacher's competence in teaching through English.   Social support for teachers in this respect also needs to be examined.   Based on my experience as a teaching practitioner, I assume that a collective, or institutional, policy of teaching in

English would be helpful for individual teachers of a given school or department, not only psychologically but also in terms of the teachers' classroom interactions with their students, especially where the students are not used to receiving English-medium instruction from Japanese teachers. The SELHi project offers an advantage in this respect, since the public situation would make it easier for the group of teachers of a given high school to make a monolithic approach to their students.

There is one crucial issue regarding the relationship between the teacher's proficiency in English and his or her instruction. Supposing that a Japanese teacher feels the need to use Japanese during a lesson or when making a lesson plan. It is necessary for the teacher to ask whether it is a matter of deliberate language choice, as in Satchwell (1999), or something caused by such factors as the weak state of the teacher's own English and a lack of information on techniques and skills in conducting a particular section of a lesson in English. In my view, those teachers who have started teaching in English recently need to learn to use English all the time during a lesson, or at least in a particular section or activity of a lesson.

(2) Negative views on teaching through English

Certain views on teaching through English could impede individual teachers' classroom use of English. An idea which I am occasionally faced with while talking to secondary school in-service teachers is that if the teacher teaches English entirely in English, that would make it hard for students to cope with the instruction. There are at least two missing points in this argument. One is the matter of the teacher's linguistic tuning to his or her students' proficiency. It is necessary for the teacher to tell students something comprehensible, at least to a certain extent, not only in terms of content but also linguistically.

Another missing point is the importance of the kinds of advantages of the teacher's target language use as discussed by Halliwell (1992). For example, if the teacher tends to relapse into the mother tongue based on a perception of a difficulty given to students through English-medium instruction, it may easily delay the time when the students can develop the ability to predict meaning and trust in it. This is related to what notion students are encouraged to develop regarding what it is to understand English. It makes a difference whether the students are instilled with the notion of one hundred percent comprehension of spoken or written English which is thought to be gained through translating every bit of the English they encounter, or the students are invited to go through obscurities of what they hear or read to develop a greater comprehension. Whether to offer a course intended to cultivate translation skills is a different matter.

(3) Maximizing the target language use and considerations of classroom factors

Dickson's study (1996), from Britain, is a rare survey on what is actually happening in the classroom in terms of the teacher's target language use. I personally have not found any similar surveys which were conducted in Japan. The study is not based on any direct classroom observations made by outsider teachers or researchers. It is a comprehensive survey on the teachers' perceptions of their own target language use and their students'. The survey was conducted with some five hundred secondary school foreign language teachers in England and Wales, inclusive of both native-speaking and non-native speaking teachers. The viewpoints and results of this study may also be useful for primary school teachers, and in

fact Moon (2000) mentions some viewpoints similar to Dickson's.   Dickson's main observation is that some factors other than teachers' own proficiency level may affect their use of the target language and that teachers may be residing somewhere between the principle of maximizing the target language use and their own considerations of those factors.

One major factor is the teacher's perceived need to adapt his or her instruction to classroom conditions (e.g., disorderly behavior, lower achieving pupils and large classes).   Another factor is the teacher's beliefs in appropriate patterns of the use of the two languages.   For "pronunciation" and "spoken fluency," nearly all the respondents chose the items indicating teaching in the target language all the time or mostly.   For "listening comprehension," "knowledge of vocabulary," "accuracy" and "confidence," more than fifty-percent chose "everything" or "mostly" in the target language.   On the other hand, more than fifty percent of the respondents chose either a combination of the two languages or mostly in the mother tongue for "motivation" and "cultural awareness," which reminds us of Johnstone's awareness model (1994).   Nearly all the respondents chose these arrangements for teaching "knowledge of grammar."

Other factors extracted from the teachers' comments are: the need for a rapport with pupils and its connection to pupils' motivation and learning, the conceptual level of learning content, time allocation and distribution, and effective learning possibly arising from exploiting the relationship between the target language and the mother tongue, and pupils' reluctance to use the target language and its relationship to Britain's linguistically and culturally isolated situation.

Dickson's study also deals with teacher views on the easiness/difficulty of using the target language for different instructional acts.   The items chosen by more than half of the respondents as easy were: "ask questions," "comment on work," "direct pupils," "correct mistakes" and "organize activities."   The items thought to be difficult were: "discipline pupils," "set homework," "explain meaning" and "teach grammar." In addition, the results of this survey suggest that "answer questions," "role play" in pairs, and "conversation" in pairs were the only activities often conducted by students in the target language.

My experience of making classroom observations of secondary school Japanese teachers suggests that some of the features identified by Dickson (1996) can also be seen among Japanese teachers.   One is that grammatical knowledge is often taught in Japanese, which leads to the need to explore how the teacher might help students to learn to use grammar.   Another feature I have attested is the teacher's consideration of the conceptual level of learning content.   A sample statement from a high school teacher is that cognitively demanding content is dealt with in the textbook and this leads him to offer a translated version of the original text to his students.   How to offer a translated version may depend on the teacher. Some teachers may do so either before, during or after the lesson, on the blackboard or in the form of a handout.   In summary, my observations of Japanese teachers are limited.   Inspired by Dickson's study (1996), it is useful to look into the classroom factors Japanese teachers bear in mind and their solutions to problems related to target language use.

For teacher development

This section is for pre-service student teachers and for those in-service teachers who might regard themselves as beginners in terms of using English in the classroom.   It covers four particular aspects of developing skills in teaching in English.

(1) Developing classroom English

The kind of language usable to direct students to organize classroom activities might be one of the first aspects of target language use focused upon by the teacher, once he or she decides to conduct instruction in English.   A group of teachers working together at a given school may make a list of utterances which are immediately usable for this purpose.   A sample inventory available to me is from a high school conducting a SELHi project.   It includes a group of English items equivalent to thirteen Japanese utterances (e.g., "Turn your paper over.", "Make groups of four.", "Who wants to go first?"), as well as those equivalents to a collection of students' utterances (e.g., "How do you say ~ in English?", "What does this mean?").

Hughes's handbook (1981) offers the most comprehensive collection of sample teacher utterances.   It covers various aspects of classroom English, as shown in the following list, and thus would help the teacher to expand his or her inventory.

a) Beginning of lesson (e.g., "Sit down and let's get started.", "Who is absent today?")

b) End of lesson (e.g., "I'm afraid it's time to finish now.", "We'll do the rest of this chapter on Thursday.", "No noise as you leave.")

c) Set phrases for apologies, thanking, warning, etc.

d) Textbook activity (e.g., "Take one and pass them on.", "It's in the top left-hand corner.", "Has anybody got anything for the last one?")

e) Blackboard activity (e.g., "Come up and write the sentence on the board.")

f) Tape activity (e.g., "Can you all hear?", "Let me just find the beginning again.")

g) Slides, Pictures, OHPs, etc. (e.g., "Switch the lights off.", "Roll up the screen.")

h) Games and songs (e.g., "These two rows are one team." "Let's listen to the tune first, then we'll look at the lyrics.")

i) Movement, general activity, and class control (e.g., "Put your desks together into groups of four.", "Work in pairs.")

j) Repetition and responses (e.g., "Sorry, I didn't quite hear what you said.", "That's exactly the point.", "I'm afraid that's not quite right, because………..")

k) Encouragement and confirmation (e.g., "That's much better.", "You're almost there.", "Have a guess if you don't know.")

l) Progress in work (e.g., "Who needs help?", "Who would like to do this?", "Which topic/subject would you like to work on?")

m) Language work (e.g., "It sounds better to say …………..", "What is the noun derived from electric?", "Be careful with the 'sh'-sound.")

In the field of primary English teaching, Halliwell (1992: 15-18) encourages teachers to conduct activities with simple phrasing while making use of actions and facial expressions.   This kind of brevity should also be useful in other educational levels.   Halliwell offers sample teacher words and actions for a paired reading activity.   In this way, she invites primary school teachers of English as a foreign language to a greater use of the target language in the classroom.   Slattery and Willis (2001) offer a rich collection of sample instructional languages, from the phrases to be used in different phases of a lesson (e.g., how to start or end a lesson, and how to organize the classroom) through those usable for various instructional functions (e.g., directing, turn-giving, explaining and demonstrating) to sample talks about particular topics. Among these aspects of the teacher's target language use, the topic talk can be most enlightening if the teacher is concerned mainly with using the target language for classroom management or organizing pupils' activities.

(2) Teacher talking to students in English

Directions and instructions are not the only kind of language the teacher may use in the classroom. Another domain of the teacher's use of English in the classroom includes set activities which seem to me to be related to the teacher's story telling skills.   One example is the above-mentioned "topic talk" recommended by Slattery and Willis (2001).   I assume some Japanese teachers of English are using this technique, although they may not know Slattery and Willis.   In a junior high school classroom I saw the teacher starting her lesson with her informal talk about a big snowfall on the previous day and how her children helped her to get out of her car with a lot of snow on it.   Another well-known activity is called "oral introduction," or, in its renewed term, "oral interaction," which is used to introduce a new story in the textbook.   How to talk about the new story depends on the teacher, and some teachers might use an introduction to the story already offered in the textbook where available.

Learning classroom English and practicing offering topic talk and oral introduction cannot be the mere necessary condition for competence to conduct instruction in English.   It is a basic need of the teacher to make continuous efforts to improve his or her own English.   If the teacher is not satisfied with his or her own spontaneous speaking skills, it is instructive to note that the teacher can work out a mental image of what he or she is going to say in a lesson and make sure of uncertain vocabulary items or grammatical points.   The teacher may even write their speech draft and do some rehearsing before the lesson.   This also applies to "topic talk" and "oral introduction."   A session for an "oral interaction" contains question-and-answer exchanges between the teacher and students, and therefore less controllable than "oral introduction."   However, in an "oral interaction" as well, the teacher can predict what might come in those question-and-answer exchanges.   What needs to be avoided by a beginner teacher is to hold an all-or-nothing notion between an excellent spontaneous talk and his or her inability for that.

(3) A reflective approach

Moon (2000) shows a reflective approach to teacher development.   Moon is oriented towards encouraging teachers to develop their own ways of interacting and communicating with pupils, while reflecting on their own teaching practice in terms of their concerns about teaching through English and with regard to their effects on pupils.   Moon gives us opportunities to look at various transcribed verbal interactions between a

teacher and pupils, which in turn encourages us teachers to reflect on how we usually interact with our students linguistically.   A useful device for looking back on one's own linguistic behavior in the classroom is video recording and viewing of lessons, through which the teacher might also notice other behavioral features of his or her own (e.g., posture).

(4) Making observations on model teachers

As for pre-service training in the undergraduate teacher's certificate programs in this country, it is a common practice for student teachers to make observations of in-service teachers' lessons during the period of time for practice teaching.   Classroom observations among Japanese in-service teachers, on the other hand, seems to have been commonly practiced by primary school teachers, but to a much lesser degree by high school teachers.   However, it seems that the practice of classroom observation is becoming more common, not only among secondary school teachers but also among university faculty members.   The SELHi project represents this new development, in which, I assume, teachers have learned to make their classes more open to other people than before in order to improve their instruction.   What seems to me to be an underdeveloped aspect of English teacher learning is the opportunity to learn from experienced and competent native-speaking teachers of English through classroom observations.

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