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# The Role of Japanese Language Support in EFL Education

David Burger

The fourth meeting of the 2009 English Education Study Group was held on December 14, 2009, at the Seigakuin Shogai Gakushu Center in Komagome. Michael Critchley of Josai International University spoke on the topic of “The Role of L1 [first language] Support in the EFL Classroom.” Critchley was born in Canada and has lived and taught in Japan for the past 19 years, during which time he has extensively researched and lectured on the contentious issue of the use of Japanese in English-language classrooms.

Critchley began his presentation by asking participants what kind of Japanese support they use in their classes, whether they ever use bilingual or Japanese materials, and how they felt about providing Japanese support. All the teachers present seemed to use Japanese in class to varying degrees, but none seemed eager to admit it. According to Critchley, English is one of the few languages where it is often insisted that classroom instruction be mostly, if not entirely, in English—in the student’s second language. As he noted, in foreign language classes in North America where students share the same L1, instruction is conducted mostly in the students’ L1, even by native speaking teachers of the target language who have proficiency in the L1, such as my own college German teacher in the United States. Why is English education different?

According to Critchley, this practice is based on a number of false assumptions. The greatest of all is that English only is the optimal learning environment. This comes out of the communicative language teaching approach of the 1970s and 1980s that stressed total or near total immersion in the target language. However, Critchley stressed that research evidence is “greatly in favor of timely L1

support.” For instance, cognitive processing studies support the conclusion that even advanced learners are less efficient at absorbing information from the target language than from their L1s. Among the rationales for timely L1 support that Critchley cited were increased comprehensible input; avoidance of pragmatic failure (inappropriate language use); increased time-on-task; focus on form; avoidance of excessive “negotiation of meaning,” whereby teachers try to explain something that may be too complicated for students’ comprehension levels; and increased immediacy, a psychological term that refers, in this case, to the closeness students feel towards a teacher because the teacher can communicate in the students’ L1.

Throughout, Critchley emphasized the importance of needs analysis to measure how much L1 support students want. Thus, teachers should use as much L1 as students want but encourage them to use the target language “when they know you know they can say it in English.” Critchley also recommended the use of bilingual materials. In fact, he has authored a textbook that has both an English-only version and a separate Japanese-only version.



講師 Critchley 城西大学助教授

Summarizing the main points of his lecture, Critchley offered “9 ‘Do’ s of L1 Support.” Among them, “use Japanese to reduce teacher explanation and increase student talk” and “give Japanese translations [ “subtitles” rather than “exact translation” ] for



14名の参加者があった

enabling (functional) language.” In addition, Japanese should be used especially for grammar explanations and quick definitions of words. Finally, “use English for anything that has already been taught in Japanese” and “use Japanese to explain high-stakes assessment or rules” so that no student is “disadvantaged because they don’ t understand information that will affect their learning or classroom performance.”

Thanks to Michael Critchley’ s research-based arguments, the teachers present for the fourth 2009 English Education Study Group took back to their classrooms new insights into the more effective use of the L1 and came away with greater confidence that their judicious use of the L1 in class is beneficial to students.

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