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Toward Learner Development: Embracing Adaptation and Exploration in a Japanese Educational Environment

My journey toward fostering learner autonomy and development unfolds within the unique context of a purely Japanese environment. Emphasizing the importance of English instruction conducted in English, I have encountered numerous challenges along the way, yet I recognize these as integral components of the academic journey.

I teach in one campus of the National Institute of Technology (“Kosen”), which is implementing a new English curriculum as part of the Global Engineer Development Project. The ultimate goal of this project is the internationalization of the college and the production of engineers with strong global competence. Among the 55 colleges, mine was among the few that the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) granted this project. In my position, I prioritize the cultivation of practical communication skills. I teach classes such as Practical English Communication and Practical Engineering English, which utilize active learning approaches such as project-based learning, task-based learning, and CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning). In addition to my teaching role, I oversee the Global Commons, a place where I provide English study support and assist students studying abroad. I also organize international exchange events to promote cross-cultural understanding.

Upon joining this institution, my vision was clear: to instill a culture of English immersion, advocating for an English-only policy to facilitate linguistic proficiency among students. However, navigating this path in an environment entrenched in Japanese instructional norms presented significant hurdles. Students, accustomed to hours of English instruction conducted mostly in Japanese, initially struggled to adapt to this paradigm shift. Their hesitancy to embrace English as the primary medium of instruction hindered the realization of my goals, prompting a reassessment of my approach.

With 22 years of teaching experience in EFL and ESL contexts, I steadfastly avoid using students’ native language (L1) for instruction, even with college-level students averaging 200 to 300 TOEIC scores. My commitment to English immersion stems from the belief that L1 use diminishes language acquisition effectiveness. I believe that students need sufficient exposure to and opportunities for both receiving and producing English. The English classroom is the primary avenue for students to apply the language. Thus, instructors should prioritize establishing a linguistically immersive learning environment. However, merely transitioning from the learners’ native language (L1) to the target language (L2) does not address the challenge adequately (Shibasaki, 2020). Instead, instructors need to shift from using Japanese to employing English as the medium of instruction. Additionally, if instructors hesitate to utilize the target language, effective teaching and learning outcomes may be compromised. Therefore, creating English-rich environments fosters linguistic competence vital for academic and professional success.

Teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in my context poses a distinct set of challenges. For one, in my context, English classes are predominantly taught using the grammar-translation method. While the purpose is pragmatic, aiming to yield results in national and university examinations and to facilitate classroom management, this approach proves detrimental to students’ English proficiency in the long run. English instruction still reflects elements of traditional approaches, emphasizing

grammar, reading, and writing over productive English skills like oral communication. As a result, English teachers often rely heavily on Japanese in their instruction. Reforming this deeply entrenched academic culture is imperative, both in my context and nationwide.

Another challenge is the students' varying English proficiency levels. In my case, where I teach 40 students in a class, quality language instruction may be hampered, and thus students enter ESP classrooms with diverse levels of proficiency. This heterogeneity demands adaptive teaching approaches that cater to the individual learning needs of students, requiring instructors to employ differentiated instruction strategies to ensure meaningful learning outcomes for all learners.

Compounding these challenges was the reliance on student evaluations, which often failed to capture the nuances of effective teaching in a bilingual setting. Despite my frustration with the feedback, I recognized the importance of constructive criticism in refining my pedagogical strategies. Feeling isolated in my advocacy for an English-only approach, especially amidst colleagues who predominantly used Japanese in English classes, intensified my sense of professional solitude. Students tend to favor instruction in Japanese rather than engaging in English-mediated communication, but I remained resolute in my commitment to effecting positive change, even in the face of minimal support from both colleagues and administrators. As a newcomer, I have confronted significant challenges aligning with student expectations and adjusting my teaching methods accordingly. Reflecting on this, I recognize the need to delicately balance tradition and innovation in my approach.

In response to the prevailing circumstances, I tried *translanguaging* as a pragmatic solution. Creese and Blackledge (2015) adopt a common definition of translanguaging as an instructional strategy in which two or more languages are used alongside each other, in this case, L1 (Japanese) and L2 (English). A recent systematic review of 10 eligible studies on pedagogical translanguaging concludes that the efficacy of pedagogical translanguaging in enhancing language proficiency, particularly in the target language, lacks clarity regarding its ability to demonstrate substantive improvements in learning outcomes (Huang & Chalmers, 2023).

In the classroom, translanguaging represents a commonsense approach to language instruction. However, I have noticed through official classroom observations of my colleagues that it is frequently misapplied, with teachers relying excessively on Japanese rather than the target language during instruction. While the use of the native language can serve as a bridge to comprehension, an overreliance on Japanese may inadvertently hinder students' immersion and fluency development in English. Moreover, the direct translation of expressions from Japanese to English may lead to a loss of nuance and cultural context, impeding students' understanding of the subtleties and intricacies of the English language. This practice poses a notable drawback, potentially leading students to disengage from English instruction and prioritize comprehension solely in Japanese, thereby undermining the primary objective of fostering English language proficiency.

Still, I recognized the need to meet students halfway while striving to maintain the integrity of my pedagogical philosophy. While this departure from my initial vision was met with internal conflict, I witnessed tangible improvements in student participation as a result.

Amidst the compromises made, I found solace in the efficacy of certain adaptations. Integrating movement-based activities into the curriculum proved instrumental in stimulating cognitive engagement and bridging the gap between theory and practice. Likewise, establishing clear class routines and procedures fostered a sense of security and belonging among students, enhancing their overall confidence and participation.

Expanding upon the challenges and successes encountered in this journey, I find that the intersection of cultural norms and pedagogical ideals provides a rich tapestry for exploration. The initial resistance to an English-only policy highlighted the deeply ingrained nature of traditional instructional methods within the institution. It became apparent that bringing about meaningful change would require a nuanced approach, one that balanced ideological principles with practical realities.

In grappling with the limitations of student evaluations, I came to appreciate the need for a more holistic understanding of teaching effectiveness. While student feedback is undoubtedly valuable, it must be complemented by peer observations, self-reflection, and objective measures of student learning outcomes. By broadening the scope of assessment, we can ensure a more comprehensive and accurate evaluation of pedagogical practices.

The adoption of *translanguaging*, albeit reluctantly, represented a pivotal turning point in my approach to instruction. While initially perceived as a compromise, it ultimately proved to be a valuable tool for bridging linguistic barriers and fostering inclusivity in the classroom. By embracing students' native language as a means of scaffolding learning, and not heavily relying on it, I was able to create a supportive environment where all voices were heard and valued.

Looking ahead, I am optimistic about the transformative potential of ongoing collaboration and dialogue within the educational community. By sharing insights, exchanging best practices, and embracing innovation, we can collectively shape a more dynamic and responsive learning environment. While the road ahead may be challenging, it is through perseverance, adaptability, and a shared commitment to excellence that we can pave the way toward a brighter future for learner development in a Japanese educational environment.

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