

# Let's do it in English!

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## The need for a large amount of input

As is mentioned in major second language acquisition theories, it is crucial to be exposed to a great amount of input for language acquisition to occur. We have to give students a large quantity of input, some of which they can absorb, leading them to production. Input has to come first, then intake, and finally output. There is no small degree of controversy about the indispensability of verbal input from teachers. Therefore, do we teachers provide plenty of verbal input for students? Do we speak to students in English sufficiently? I would answer, "No." Although we are required to develop students' fundamental and practical communication skills, Junior and Senior High School English Classes conducted in English are very rare. Unfortunately, English classes in general are dominated by the Japanese language. It is clear that we should improve this unfavorable language-learning environment.

## Input-rich English classes

Some high schools have successfully conducted their English classes in English, building students' motivation and interest in learning, and improving communicative and practical skills as well as the academic skills which are indispensable for passing the entrance exams.<sup>1</sup>

However, to make a class "All English,"

can make us feel hesitant and inadequate, or may not be effective if we insist on the "All" aspect. I usually use English when I: 1) give a small talk at the beginning of the class, 2) give instructions about activities, 3) explain new words and expressions, 4) summarize or paraphrase the text, 5) give additional information on the contents, 6) ask questions, 7) engage in casual talk with students, 8) make jokes, and so on. In explaining grammatical rules I use both languages, giving priority to Japanese if target grammatical structures are very abstract or complicated. I do not hesitate to code-switch the languages from English to Japanese after assessing students' reactions, which reflect their understanding. In my bilingual English class, of which about two thirds is conducted in English and the rest in Japanese, students take it for granted that I will often change the languages. In the short homeroom period just after my English class, I often talk to them in English without noticing it, after which they sometimes respond in English. We can make English our second official language in the classroom.

## Tips for an input-rich English class

Teachers, in most cases, should use English that is comprehensible to students. Otherwise, the class may just become a demonstration of the English ability of the teacher. I would suggest that teachers:

1) make short statements, 2) keep explanations

brief and concrete, 3) repeat the target words, expressions and sometimes grammatical structures, and 4) simplify information by reformulating. While speaking, teachers should: 1) pronounce clearly, 2) pause when students need time to process information, 3) use gestures and facial expressions, 4) write essential, difficult words and expressions on the blackboard. It is crucial for teachers to adjust their English so that students can understand it; if not, teachers may end up resorting to the overuse of Japanese. However we may sometimes want to use English that is slightly beyond students' current state of knowledge, if we accept Krashen's argument that learners should be exposed to  $i$  (learners' current level)  $+1$  in order for language acquisition to occur (Krashen, 1985). I think that especially when students are actively participating in the class with high motivation we can expose them to  $i+1$  input. While I am teaching ESS members who are enthusiastic about learning, I intentionally add  $+1$  input expecting that new words, expressions and even grammatical structures may be learned through listening. Van Patten claims that "only when input is easily understood can learners attend to form as a part of the intake process" (1990, p.296), while Faerch & Kasper argue that "if input is to function as intake to the learners of higher-level L2 materials, learners need to experience comprehension problems" (1986, p.270). It is still controversial whether  $+1$  should be provided or not. If so, when and for whom? As even the definition of  $+1$  is vague, the final decision must be left to the teachers themselves since they have great experience of learning and teaching.<sup>2</sup> However, the important point is that to convey true intention and meaning that is complicated or subtle for students, we have to depend on Japanese to avoid any

misunderstanding. If teachers' ability to speak English does not allow them to communicate what they mean, they must not hesitate to code-switch their languages. There is a risk that an *all* English class may create a "dry as dust" impression because rich and meaningful information is not conveyed due to the limited English from teachers. It is like putting the cart before the horse. Of course, what to teach (the contents of the class) should come first, and then how to teach (the language teachers use) should follow. After evaluating our own English proficiency and reading students' comprehension through their reactions, we have to code-switch our languages from English to Japanese (and from Japanese to English). However, deciding the timing of when to code-switch can be very difficult. If we code-switch too often, students might not listen to our English. We have to code-switch only at the right time, flexibly and spontaneously. The art of code-switching is something acquired through much experience and practice.

### Suggestions

To create optimal, input-rich bilingual English classes, it is necessary for teachers to possess a strong command of English as well as high discourse competence, which enables much input of high quality, inducing more communication in the classroom. I believe that we teachers should seriously exert ourselves to improve our English without simply trying to find efficient teaching methods or create apparently effective systems. I should also add my suggestion that English should be the first (or the second) official language among English teachers. I have seen many workshops, conferences, study sessions and meetings,

most of which were conducted only in Japanese. It is a shame that even among English teachers, English is rarely used. In this inadequate environment, we will never be able to create an input-rich bilingual learning situation. If English is officially required, teachers will feel pushed to learn to use it. Let's do it in English!

## Note

1. One rare and valuable example is Asahikawa Kita S.H.S, in which a well-organized "All English Class" has been carried out successfully for years.
2. My belief is that SLA research gives us implications not answers, so that we have to struggle in improving our own English. The benefits would be reflected in our classes and would help us to utilize theories on second language acquisition.

## Reference

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