Teachers’ use of L1 in the classrooms: as a tool of making the classroom interaction authentic

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The purpose of this study is to examine how teachers use their students’ L1 in English classes and to explore its effectiveness in a certain pedagogical context.

Japanese government has decided to make the English program as a core subject in Grades 5 and 6 in 2020. The new curriculum guidelines for middle school English education direct English classes to be taught basically all in English. That will raise question if it is essential also in elementary schools to teach English only in English.

This study consists of classroom observations, field notes and interviews of the teachers at some elementary schools where English is taught in “Foreign Language Activities.” The classroom data were transcribed and analyzed by using Nagy(2009)’s coding scheme and discourse analysis. It is revealed that L1 was used mostly for three functions: instruction, translation, and question. Another result shows that the amounts of teachers’ use of L1 depended on their belief in English teaching, their proficiency in English or the types of activities. When the activities were content-enriched, the teachers tended to use more L1 to make the classroom interaction authentic or to reduce the learners’ anxiety with jokes, whereas L1 was used less when the activities were dominated by mechanical drills and repetitions.

Teachers put different foci in different pedagogical contexts, and they sometimes abandon what they do not focus on (Seedhouse, 2004). The use of L1 would lessen exposure to the L2 (Cook, 1991) and foreign language teachers should maximize L2 input. However, the results suggest that appropriate L1 use may secure authentic interaction and provide a comfortable learning environment especially for the very beginners such as elementary school children.

Keywords: EFL, elementary school, L1 use.