Motivational feedback in an EFL environment: Does language make a difference?

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been a call for English classes in Japan to be conducted entirely in the second language, with little to no use of the students' mother tongue. In the present paper, we investigate the effects of praising language students in either Japanese or a foreign language (i.e., English). Following the recommendations of research conducted using the Self-worth Theory, praise for effort was given to university students in either Japanese or English during interview tests. The times participants took to complete tasks given in the tests were recorded, comparing the same items presented in similar ways and whether the language in which students were praised would result in their completing tasks more quickly. No significant increases in speed were observed. The authors conclude that the language choice for praise results in no salient difference to the performance of students, suggesting that rather than language choice, the approach to praising students as a more critical area for future research.

Key words：
L2 Motivation (第二言語動機づけ)
Self Worth Theory (自己価値理論)
Praise (ほめること)

1 .Introduction

According to the guidelines announced by the Japan Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers in Japanese classrooms should conduct their classes in English. The main purpose of discouraging the use of the students' first language (L1) in the EFL classroom were 1) to help students increase their vocabulary bank, and 2) to make classes reflect authentic communicative situations. It is commonly known that, until recently, in order to help students prepare for important entrance examinations to high school and university, many junior and senior

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high school English teachers in Japan seemed to focus on grammatical points or reading and writing. It was thought that using the students' L1 would make explanations easier to understand, and thus allow teachers to cover a wider range of language in a shorter time than would be possible in classes taught entirely in the second language (L2).

However, according to some researchers (e.g., Sakai, 2009), this grammar-focused teaching style may make students get bored or dislike English. As a result, many students were not able to improve their communication skills. Consequently, MEXT introduced a new teaching guideline in which communication became the core around which English was taught. However, there remains the question of whether it is more beneficial for these classes to be taught solely in the L2, or some use of the L1 should be allowed. The present paper attempts to address this topic, giving insight from a student motivational and performance perspective as to whether using the L2 exclusively is in fact better than a classroom where both languages are used.

Literature review

There are numerous theories in psychology surrounding the most effective ways to increase the learning motivation of students. The majority of researches show that although extrinsic rewards may result in short-term benefits, increasing the intrinsic motivation of students, that is the drive that comes from within, is the most effective way of motivating students over a long term (See Deci and Ryan, 1985 for an overview of the Self-determination Theory).

Most people would tend to agree that giving praise to students is an important part of increasing students' intrinsic drive to learn. Many teachers tend to base their praise on their students' results by saying *Well done!* or *You are really smart!* when students perform well in class or tests. However, Self-worth Theory researchers suggest this praise for students' ability to be in fact detrimental for their effort thereafter. Covington's Self-worth Theory suggests "the protection of a sense of ability is the student's highest priority" (1992, p. 17). Therefore, when students are faced with situations in which they may fail, many *purposefully* make no effort, even resorting to sleeping during class in order to protect their sense of ability. Thus, when they do not do well in class assessment, they are able to attribute this to their laziness, rather than lack of ability. Covington calls upon teachers to focus their efforts on increasing the importance of process, and not to simply look at the final product. Research reported by Mueller and Dweck (1998) supports Covington, suggesting that when students are praised for effort, they are willing to take on more difficult tasks, but on the other hand, when praised for ability, they tend to choose the easier route just in case they fail, and consequently not praised.

Leis (2013, 2014) provided empirical evidence to support the idea of praise for effort rather than ability in an EFL environment. In this study, feedback for ability given to students in their mother tongue (i.e., Japanese) resulted in decreased performance amongst students. These studies provide ample evidence that praise for effort is indeed more beneficial for students. However, there remains the debate of which language such praise should be given in: the students' L1 or the target language (TL).

There have been several studies discussing the use of students' L1 in the L2 classroom. Shoji (2008), for example, suggests that in spite of teachers' efforts encouraging students to avoid using their L1, 92 percent of students believe that translation helps learn the L2 more effectively. Furthermore, 82 percent of students feel it necessary in their language learning process to have an awareness of the differences between their L1 and the L2. Shoji concludes that despite the popular opinion that attention to L1 may hinder progress in language learning, the use of translation activities and calculated use of the L1 in fact enhance the L2 acquisition process.

In a report based on interviews with 10 native-speaker EFL university teachers in Japan, Ford (2009) advised that if students understand that their

teachers' Japanese is good, they tend to address the teacher in the L1 (i.e., Japanese). As a result, teachers limit their students' own opportunities for L2 practice and improve their ability to communicate in the L2. On the other hand, when students were free to communicate in the L1, it brought about more success in group projects and presentations. Moreover, L1 use helped improve teacher-student rapport through the creation of a positive, friendly classroom atmosphere necessary for successful learning.

With researchers recommending the use of the students' L1 in the EFL classroom, there remains the question of how much and when it should be used. Meyer (2008) suggests that the amount of use and how it is employed should vary with each classroom environment. Use of the L1 does have its advantages, such as providing scaffolding, which should be gradually dismantled as students' language proficiency progress. Also, L1 can assist in making the classroom a more comprehensible place and help lower affective filters. However, as Meyer stresses, maximizing L2 use should be the goal in every classroom. At the same time, exclusive use of the L2 can lead to confusion and anxiety, resulting in the demotivation of students to learn. Allowing use of the L1 will alleviate communication anxiety, fear of negative evaluation by peers and distress surrounding tests. Mixing the L1 and the L2 during the class (i.e., code switching) can also be effective by using the L1 to supply unfamiliar vocabulary items to students, especially useful when conducting story-telling activities.

The above studies all suggest that exclusive use of the L2 in an EFL environment may be detrimental to students' motivation to learn. Through allowing the L1 to be called upon by teachers and students, anxiety can be reduced, creating a more comfortable environment for learning. However, too much use of the L1 will also hinder students' progress in their language studies. Therefore, more research is required regarding which language is more appropriate at various times of the lesson. The present paper will now discuss the use of L1 and L2 for praising students, and whether the use of the students' native language is indeed more effective in increasing students' language proficiency.

This study

Research question

The present paper purports to investigate the following research question:

Is it more effective to give motivational feedback to students in their L1 than in the TL?

We hypothesize, based on the research referred to above, that it will be more beneficial for students when feedback is given in their native tongue. The use of the L1 when giving motivational feedback helps create rapport and is easier to understand for students, keeping the tempo of the lesson fast.

Subjects

Thirty-nine native speakers of Japanese attending a university in northeast Japan participated in the present study. There were 18 male and 21 female students participating with an average age of 18.69 (SD = 0.66). Of these participants, 30 were chosen to participate in the interview. However, due to some students being absent, data from 19 students (i.e., six male, 13 female) were available for analysis. Even though the participants had had six years of official English lessons at junior and senior high school, their English proficiency was deemed to be low, based on their average score of 308 (SD = 30.13) in the TOEIC® Test. When asked to indicate whether they liked English on a scale of 1 (i.e., I really dislike English) to 5 (I really like English), the participants showed intermediate affection, with an average of 2.62 (SD = 1.06).

Method

Students' opinions regarding the use of L1 and L2 were measured through a questionnaire conducted in their regular class time. Based on the questionnaire,

three groups were created for the purpose of this study: English Group (henceforth, EG), Japanese Group (henceforth, JG) and Control Group (henceforth, CG). Due to 11 students being absent for the interview, the final number of students participating was 19 with seven in the EG, seven in the JG and five in the CG.

The students were asked to come individually to a room designated by the researchers. One of the researchers, a native speaker of Japanese, conducted the interviews, giving short greetings and explaining the process of the interview in Japanese. During the interview, participants were asked to complete an English test (Appendix A) of items requiring them to rearrange words into their correct grammatical word order. The students were given a time limit of one minute to complete each item, which were only provided one at a time. The interviewer measured the time it took the participants to complete each item in the test.

The interviewer praised participants in the EG in English when they completed the test items correctly (e.g., *Great effort!*), and incorrectly (e.g., Okay, you didn't get this one. But you tried really hard.). On the other hand, participants in the JG were praised for their effort in Japanese when they completed the items correctly (e.g., *ganbarimashitane*) and incorrectly (e.g., *muzukashikattane. Demo ganbatta to omoimasuyo.*). Students in the CG were not praised either when they completed items correctly, or were unsuccessful.

Finally, the participants were asked not to discuss the interview with other members. The entire interview process took approximately 15 minutes for each participant.

Results and discussion

The research question in the present paper asks whether it is more effective for teachers to give motivational feedback to students in their native language than in the TL. In the current research, the time students took to complete grammatical problems presented to them during an interview was recorded. Comparisons were made between problems at the beginning of the interview and at the end of the interview that used the same grammatical structure. The more effective way of providing motivational feedback would be measured by comparing the difference between the first and second time of doing these problems.

Table 1 shows the descriptives for each group in the current study. Paired samples *t*-tests were conducted to compare the differences in times for Test 1 and Test 9, and Test 2 and Test 10 for each group. A statistically significant slower time was only reported for the Control Group when comparing the times between Test 2 (M = 41.37, SD = 13.23) and Test 10 (M = 53.26, SD = 9.32) $t(4) = -3.92$, $p = .017$. The 95% confidence interval for the mean difference between the two times was -20.31 and -3.92. It is important to note here that surprisingly, these times were significantly *slower* in Test 10 than in Test 2. This, along with all groups showing slower times in latter tests, albeit not statistically significant, indicates different results from previous research projects (e.g., Dweck & Reppucci, 1973; Mueller and Dweck, 1998; Leis, 2013, 2014), in which subjects who had been praised for effort displayed a significantly better performance when doing a similar test the second time.

Because both the EG and JG showed similar patterns in the time it took them to complete the items, it can be concluded that when praising students with the aim of increasing their motivation and language ability, the language chosen does not make a difference. Therefore, we can say that rather than the language being used by the instructor, it is more important to consider the type of praise being given in order to increase students' drive to study and their language ability.

Table 1. Descriptives for each Group in the Present Paper.

Test	Group	*N*	*M*	*SD*	95%CI
1	English	7	49.01	11.53	[38.34, 59.68]
	Japanese	7	47.87	8.49	[40.01, 55.72]
	Control	5	51.00	12.87	[35.02, 66.98]
9	English	7	56.92	8.14	[49.40, 64.45]
	Japanese	7	51.69	10.54	[41.94, 61.43]
	Control	5	53.57	11.21	[39.64, 67.49]
2	English	7	50.49	12.72	[38.73, 62.26]
	Japanese	7	44.24	15.02	[30.35, 58.13]
	Control	5	41.37	13.23	[24.95, 57.80]
10	English	7	53.11	9.01	[44.77, 61.44]
	Japanese	7	51.97	9.56	[43.14, 60.81]
	Control	5	53.26*	9.32	[41.68, 64.84]

Note. Figures are displayed in seconds; * $p = .017$.

Limitations and future directions

The present paper has concluded that when teachers give motivational feedback through praise, language choice does not significantly affect the performance L2 learners in an EFL environment. This result, admittedly, may be influenced by several limitations which will now be discussed.

First, the sample size in the present paper was rather small. With only 19 students being available for the interviews, it is hard to accept that this will give a reliable reflection of what may occur with a wider audience. In future research, a larger sample will be vital to increase the constancy the results have with other students in similar positions.

Second, the time for the interview was very short. The language used for only 15 minutes may not have affected the students' attitudes and proficiency enough to see salient differences. It will be more effective to consider the language used when praising students over an entire language course of several weeks to reach more accurate conclusions.

Third, the items used in the interview may have been too difficult for the participants. This is supported by the fact that the second time similar items were done by the participants, the times were slower than the first time. This may have been due to either items being too difficult or mental fatigue for the participants. Creating items more appropriate to the students' proficiency of English may produce stronger conclusions in further studies.

Conclusion

The present paper has aimed to consider whether the use of students' L1 is more effective when praising students than the L2. Based on earlier research suggesting that adding the students' L1 to the EFL classroom lowers anxiety felt by students, creating a more affective learning environment, it was hypothesized that praise given in Japanese (i.e., the L1 of the participants) would be more effective in producing positive results than praise given in the L2. However, the results indicate that no such difference could be observed, suggesting that in which language the instructor chooses to praise makes no salient difference to the performance of the students. Furthermore, because the performance of the students worsened in latter tests, it can be implied that rather than the language chosen by teachers when considering increasing their students' motivation and language proficiency, the approach to giving feedback is more important to achieving improved performance.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Test items used in the interview.

1) London/ if/ her/ I/ in/ would have met/ I/ had been/ ,/ .

2) she/ me/ seeing/ waved her hand/ ,/.

3) him/ street/ I/ the/saw/ cross/ .

4) boy/ taller/ our/ any/ Tom/ class/ is/ than/ in/ other/ .

5) uncle/ Kyoto/ have/ in/ I/ who/ an/ lives/ .

6) teacher/ composition/ I had/ correct/ my/ my/ .

7) you/ outside/ man who/ wants/ a/ to/ see/ is waiting/ .

8) Mont Blanc/ other/ is/ mountain/ any/ higher/ Europe/ than/ in/ .

9) could have/ I/ had taken/ you/ photo/ if/ I/ a/ shown/ ,/ .

10) the boys/ the game/ chatted/ for/ waiting/ a bus/ about/ ,/ .

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