Optimizing new language use by employing young learners' own language

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The use and appropriate amount of students' own language (OL) in foreign language classes remains a subject of debate. While exclusive new language (NL) use may not necessarily always benefit all learners, especially young language learners (YLLs), overuse of the students' OL may not provide the same range of communicative experiences as greater NL exposure. This article reports on measures by which teachers of elementary-age YLLs use the students' OL in a systematic fashion to create an optimally rich NL environment. Successful elementary teachers of English as a foreign language in Japan and of Japanese as a foreign language in the United States were selected and observed, and classroom OL use practices enabling clear and engaging use of the NL were documented. Teachers made extensive use of signals for the use of the students' OL within routines for classroom management to reduce student confusion. These findings are discussed with implications for teachers seeking to use the students' OL to facilitate the use of the NL in class.

New and own language use in foreign language classes for young learners

One major ongoing debate in the literature on language teaching is the amount and function of the new language (NL) versus the own language (OL)[1] in class (Hall and Cook 2013). The value of using students' OL through code-switching and other practices has been increasingly recognized (Hall and Cook 2012), the suggestion being that exclusive NL may not necessarily improve acquisition over mixed OL/NL use (Macaro 2005). While many have argued that *maximal* use of the NL is desirable (and others further that OL use should consequently be prohibited) in order to provide a range of communication experiences—especially in EFL contexts (Turnbull 2001)—an *optimal* approach, where teachers judiciously use the OL to facilitate comprehension of the NL, may offer teachers greater flexibility to address classroom needs (Macaro 2009). Crucial to the optimal balance of OL and NL use is that teachers do not feel guilty using students' OL for pedagogical purposes, as they might in a maximal situation (Macaro 2009). At the same time, the optimal position does not support using the OL a majority of class time, but to use it to support smooth and efficient engagement with the NL. To better define optimal OL use,

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recent literature has called for further classroom-based investigations of the use of the students' OL in order to teach the NL (Hall and Cook 2012).

How do teachers manage the use of the students' OL to optimize NL use in class?

One often cited reason for the use of the students' OL in the classroom is for better clarity and speed of communication (Hall and Cook 2013). Many teachers feel that OL use may facilitate effective practice and clear instruction (McMillan and Rivers 2011). Looking at teachers' use of the NL in class and their functions, Inbar-Lourie (2010) indicated that teachers of elementary-age young language learners (EYLLs) offer different rationales for the differing levels of OL use in the classroom. In programmes for EYLLs designed around promoting affect rather than specific linguistic achievement, some teachers may find it easier and more desirable to use students' OL a majority of the time to provide a positive learning environment, especially for classroom management purposes with lower level students (ibid.).

At the same time, teachers in foreign language environments may feel that optimized, though not exclusive, NL use is also desirable, including those who believe that students' OL is a useful tool (Turnbull op.cit.; Inbar-Lourie op.cit.). These beliefs may relate to the idea that regularized use of the NL in the form of classroom routines has shown positive influence on EYLLs' linguistic self-confidence, which may influence positive affect and motivation (Wu 2003). Regular classroom procedures and proactive behavioural programmes have also been shown to be effective in creating positive and successful learning environments (see Good and Brophy 2008: 77–90). Finally, teachers' NL and OL use can be optimized through teacher training (Nakata 2010). Thus, the practices of teachers in successful optimal foreign language classes may offer concrete suggestions for professional development. Discussions of the use of the students' OL in order to support greater NL use may provide teachers with classroom practice suggestions.

Research question

In order to provide principles for managing teacher OL use in optimal NL classes for EYLLs, and in response to calls for additional classroom-based research on the use of the OL in foreign language teaching (Hall and Cook 2013), this study seeks to answer the following question: How do teachers manage the use of the students' OL in successful optimal approach foreign language classes?[2]

While every teacher has an individual subjective conception of what a successful class entails, this study seeks to define successful foreign language classes in the following terms.

1. Minimal behavioural problems, such as off-task activities, private conversations, and failure to comply with teacher instructions.
2. Maximal positive behavioural and emotional engagement, evidenced through positive student commentary, completion of activities, and use of the NL without coercion or reminders.
3. Lack of student confusion with regard to activities, expectations, and codes of conduct.
4. Minimal, but judicious and systematic use of the students' OL.

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The above criteria reflect many teachers' classroom ideals (Good and Brophy op.cit.). The fourth condition reflects principles from Macaro's (2009) and Turnbull's (op.cit.) discussions of effective classes. The term 'systematic' is used here to indicate regularized practices applied in a predetermined, organized fashion. In defining success in this fashion, our hope is to provide readers with a common frame of reference for the judicious use of students' OL in facilitating NL-rich classes, and thus help to provide steps for reaching that goal.

The study

Participants

This study investigated successful elementary teachers' use of the students' OL to support use of the NL in the contexts of English as a foreign language in Japan and Japanese as a foreign language (JFL) in North America.

The Japanese EFL/North American JFL environments were chosen as they offered contrasting cultural contexts for the study; in looking for practices of use to EFL teachers, finding commonalities across different cultures and contexts may offer more universal suggestions. Schools also had similar foreign language programme goals. Programmes were focused on promoting communication and positive affect through the use of the NL, similar to the programmes outlined by Inbar-Lourie (op.cit.), rather than specific linguistic achievement measured through tests or other assessments, as seen in elementary contexts such as in northern Europe (Ito 2013). The schools here did not include linguistic benchmarks that students must pass, but rather focused on communicating and enjoying using the language.

Twelve elementary schools (four in the United States, eight in Japan) were initially investigated in the fall of 2010 and spring of 2011. Of the 12 schools, six teachers at four of the schools (two North American, two Japanese) were found to meet our four criteria (above) for successful classes. Classes with student behavioural problems, low student visible engagement, or a large amount of OL use were excluded from the study. Classes were confirmed as suitable or unsuitable by peer debrief; two trusted colleagues were asked to watch videos of the classes and verified the appropriateness of the class selection according to the above criteria. In order to respect each teacher's anonymity, minimal identifying information will be presented. Teacher profiles are listed in Table 1.

The North American schools selected were two public elementary 'magnet' schools in the eastern United States. Magnet schools are publicly funded primary and lower secondary institutions with direct oversight from boards of education, created to provide equal opportunity education to students of diverse backgrounds from different public school zones within a district. Students come from a variety of ethnic, socio-economic, and linguistic backgrounds, many with diverse learning needs. Students are drawn by a lottery from areas around the school districts. The three US-based teachers each had over ten years' experience teaching Japanese in elementary schools. Teachers A and B were Japanese native speakers while Teacher C was American with training in Japan.

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Participant and school	Gender	NL	OL status	Student grades and ages	Use of OL to support NL optimization	Total time speaking students' OL across all observed classes (mm:ss)	% of total teacher talk in NL
Teacher A School 1	Female	Japanese as a foreign language	Native Japanese speaker	Grades: K–5 Ages: 5–11	Signalling; NL routines; use of the NL sound system for OL words; tight transitions	15:17 across 16 × 25:00 classes	91.7
Teacher B School 2	Female	Japanese as a foreign language	Native Japanese speaker	Grades: K–2 Ages: 5–8	NL routines; use of the NL sound system for OL words; tight transitions	0 minutes across 8 × 25:00 classes	100
Teacher C School 2	Female	Japanese as a foreign language	Native English speaker	Grades: 3–5 Ages: 8–11	Signalling; NL routines; use of the NL sound system for OL words; tight transitions	8:44 across 10 × 25:00 classes	95.4
Teacher D School 3	Male	English as a foreign language	Native English speaker	Grades: 5–6 Ages: 10–12	NL routines; signalling; tight transitions	0 minutes across 4 × 40:00 classes	100
Teacher E Teacher F School 4	E: male F: female	English as a foreign language	E: English as a second language speaker F: Native Japanese speaker	Grades: 5–6 Ages: 10–12	NL routines; signalling; use of the NL sound system for OL words; tight transitions	Teacher E: 0 minutes and Teacher F: 7:38 across 6 observed × 40:00 classes	Teacher E: 100 Teacher F: 86

Note: K = kindergarten

TABLE 1
Teachers' profiles and OL use

The settings in Japan were two local public elementary schools in suburban western Japan. School assignment was based on residence. Students were all Japanese native speakers. Teacher D was an English native speaker from an inner circle country of the English world (i.e. Australia, the United States, etc.; Kachru 1998), while Teacher E was a native-like English as a second language speaker from the expanding circle (i.e. Hong Kong, Singapore, etc.). Out of respect for these

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teachers' anonymity, exact nationalities will not be provided. Teacher D consistently taught with students' homeroom teachers (generalist classroom teachers who teach the majority of subjects; mathematics, science, language, arts, etc.). Teacher F was an English-speaking Japanese teacher who team-taught with Teacher E. Teachers D and E had between one and three years' EFL teaching experience, while Teacher F had more than ten years' experience. Both Teachers D and E worked under a contract requiring them to avoid using the students' OL, which resembled the 'English only' policies described by McMillan and Rivers (op.cit.).

Classes in all of these schools were part of programmes to provide foundations for learning a foreign language. Classes did not include proficiency and achievement testing, and placed emphasis on receptive learning, comfort, familiarization, and positive affect. Class time with the foreign language was between 45 and 75 minutes per week. Schools in the United States teach foreign languages to students from kindergarten through fifth grade, with students aged from 5 to 11 years old. In Japanese schools, foreign languages are taught to fifth and sixth grade students, aged 10 to 12 years old. Class sizes ranged from 20 to 30 children in the United States, while Japanese classes ranged from 25 to 40 pupils.

Methods

Observations were conducted over several consecutive days by the first author. Each elementary class cohort was observed at least once, and several were observed twice. Data were collected via field notes describing student and teacher behaviours and interactions. Each class was audio recorded, and where parental permission was granted, videos were taken. Key passages were coded using grounded theory axial codes (Corbin and Strauss 2008), then selected, and transcribed. Codes were based on previous findings and theoretical considerations (Good and Brophy op.cit.; Macaro 2009), in line with provisions for theoretical comparison and integration (Corbin and Strauss ibid.: 75–8).

Results

Table 1 displays each teacher's profile, grade taught, ways in which the students' own language (OL) was used to support an optimal new language (NL) classroom (i.e. Japanese in the United States; English in Japan), and the amount of teacher talk time using the NL.

In all cases, teachers used the NL in over 80 per cent of their utterances, and most used it over 90 per cent of class time. The systems by which teachers used the students' OL were coded as 'signalling', 'use of the NL sound system for single-word OL utterances', 'repeated routine use of the NL', and 'tight transitions'.

Signalling

One of the key features used by each teacher was a clear system of signalling procedures for when use of the students' OL was appropriate, though these systems and methods varied by country. As we define it, 'signalling' may be understood as a systematic method to indicate the timing and circumstances when class participants may use their OL.

Teachers of Japanese in the United States used a system of posting a laminated Japanese flag or sign with the word 'Japanese' on the

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blackboard to signal when Japanese was to be used. This sign could then be reversed to show an American flag or the word 'English' as a reminder for both teacher and students. In principle, the teachers in North America used the students' OL solely as a means of explaining complex activities and assignments. As can be seen in Extract 1 below, students were at times more apt to hold to the routine than the teacher (see Appendix 1 for transcription conventions).

Extract 1: School 2, Teacher C

Teacher C:	*Jaa, minnasan, kyou sore de owarimasu*
	(Well, everyone, that's all for today.)
	Now, there's something ...
Student:	::pointing to the flag::
	Sensei, sensei, Nihongo!
	(Teacher, teacher, Japanese!)
Teacher C:	*Ah! Wasuremashita!*
	(Oh! I forgot!)
	::turns sign around to show English::
	Now, as some of you may have heard ...

The above incident demonstrates not only the signal for maintaining the regular use of the NL, but also the importance of that signal for the students. Even when teachers forget the signal routine, students try to follow it and maintain the use of the NL, demonstrating how this classroom culture has influenced students to use the NL while expecting reciprocal behaviour from the teacher. The students' use of the NL above what might be necessary to convey a message (here, shifting the teacher's attention to the flag) also shows how accustomed the students have become to both the routine and the language.

Contrasting with the visual signalling used in the North American schools, EFL classes in Japan primarily used signals to prompt student use of their OL in order to explain, clarify, or confirm the meaning of the teacher's English. All three teachers provided students with demonstrations and English instructions, and then asked students to explain in Japanese, with native Japanese-speaking teachers confirming appropriate understanding. An example of this from Teacher D's class (Extract 2) illustrates how teachers explain in the NL but confirm understanding using the OL:

Extract 2: School 3, Teacher D

Teacher D:	Now, look at me. We're going to use our erasers. What's an eraser? [Male student A], what's an eraser?
Male student A:	*Keshi gomu*
	(Eraser.)

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Teacher D:	Yes! We're going to put our eraser in the middle. ::picks up and places eraser:: Right here. OK? So the keyword is pizza, OK? When I say 'I like pizza' you grab your eraser. If you are fast, you are the winner. OK?
Students:	OK.
Teacher D:	OK. Uh, [Male student B] please explain.
Male student B:	::points to self:: *Ore?* (Me?)
Teacher D:	Yes.
Male student B:	::hesitates:: *Nanka, erabareta tabemono wo ittara, keshigomu wo toru.* (Um, if you say the food you chose, we grab our eraser.)
Teacher D:	OK! [Homeroom teacher name], what do you think, is that OK?
Homeroom teacher:	Yes, OK.

This passage demonstrates the dual function of a system for OL use for confirming students' understanding while also creating opportunities for homeroom teachers to be involved in class, a key feature for promoting students' NL use (Oga-Baldwin and Nakata 2013). In many cases, the homeroom teacher was instrumental in facilitating the systematic signal for OL use and providing feedback, as the non-Japanese teachers were expressly forbidden from using students' OL. From this example of classroom interaction, we see the students demonstrating comprehension through the use of the OL, aided by their homeroom teacher, while primarily receiving the instruction in the NL.

Use of the new language sound system with single-word own language utterances

Several teachers used OL in a fashion that disguised its use. As seen in previous studies, teachers would insert single OL words within otherwise NL sentences (Macaro 2009), but these teachers maintained the use of the NL sound system with the OL words. In Japanese language classes in the United States, teachers would pronounce English words with a strong *kana* pronunciation (rule = *ru-ru*, blackboard = *burakku bo-do*, etc.) in sentences otherwise surrounded by Japanese. In the EFL classes in Japan, teachers would similarly use Japanese words in English sentences without reverting to *kana* pronunciation. This was most prominent with NL words that had not been previously taught, but were not related to the lesson goals, as with OL use documented by Macaro (2009).

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In one example (Extract 3), Teacher B demonstrated this during her opening routine, using NL to successfully manage a group of 5- and 6-year-old kindergarten students as they entered the classroom:

Extract 3: School 2, Teacher B

Teacher B: *Supotto, douzo. Supotto, supotto.* [Male student name]-*san, supotto e. Arigatou* [Male student name]-*san. Hai, socchi. Sou, sou. OK? Jaa, minnasan shizuka ni tatte kudasai.*

(Spots, please. Spots, spots. [Male student name], to your spot. Thank you, [Male student name]. Yes, there. Yes, yes. OK? Then, everyone quietly stand up please.)

While this teacher was using non-standard Japanese expressions (*supotto*), she did not break the feeling of using the foreign language, pronouncing this English word in the NL (i.e. Japanese) sound system.

Teachers E and F in Japan made similar use of the NL (i.e. English) sound system in their classes when asking students to use specific materials for an activity (see Extract 4). When referring to a pen case, they used the OL translation *fudebako*.

Extract 4: School 4, Teachers E and F

Teacher E: Everyone, we don't need *fudebako* today. Please put your *fudebako* under your chairs.

Teacher F: *Fudebako wa iranai.*

(We don't need our pen cases.)

Under your chair, please.

::students put pen cases under their chairs::

Teacher E: Yes, no writing today.

In the above example, the word *fudebako* is not a commonly recognized English expression, but is used to facilitate quick understanding of the classroom instructions. Teachers E and F used the Japanese expression because it was not part of the lesson target, at the same time transforming the word from the Japanese pronunciation where each syllable is equally stressed to a more English-like pronunciation. The first syllable [*fu*] was more strongly stressed and the second syllable [*de*] pronounced with a schwa. While this represents OL use, it also represents a method by which teachers can simultaneously make use of features of the NL.

Repeated routine use of the NL

Having established that some OL use facilitated NL use in the classroom, teachers also needed to ensure that NL predominated, and that students did not see *some* OL use as allowing for *much* OL use. To create a sense of familiarity, each of the observed classes used a long warm-up routine, followed by a series of short games and activities using regular repetition of the NL for this specific lesson. The warm-up

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routines were often physical, musical, or both, with elements that changed slightly throughout the year in order to maintain student interest. These routines allowed teachers to repeat language and build feelings of competence (Wu 2003), and thus were able to use increasing amounts of the NL.

While exact timing of the classes differed, at minimum roughly a quarter of the class time (10 minutes in a 45-minute class in Japan) to as much as half of the class (10 to 15 minutes in a 25-minute class in the United States) was dedicated to these routines, often followed by familiar activities. Both North American schools would start class with physical and musical routines, followed by the repetition of the basic classroom rules ('Listen well, no touching other people, raise your hand to speak, speak in Japanese'), recited by both teachers and students in Japanese. This recitation included gestures to illustrate the meaning and remind students of the protocols. The schools in Japan used similar warm-up routines with NL songs, games, and standardized questions. Following this pattern, students in both the Japanese and North American classes recognized the teachers' behavioural expectations for the class.

Routines were universally focused around prompting production, either through choral repetition, singing, chanting, or responding to prompts with pre-set chunked phrases ('I'm hungry'/'It's Thursday'/'It's 11:25'/'I like dogs', etc.). During these routines, students regularly produced language loudly and with little hesitation. As a large part of each class was dedicated to these routines, students were regularly producing language for a significant portion of their class time. Following the criteria for successful classes outlined above, students showed strong behavioural engagement, including language production.

In speaking with students in the Japanese EFL classes, they expressed the idea that the repeated activities helped them to feel a sense of certainty. In the words of one student,

> I was worried at first that I would not understand a non-Japanese teacher, but we do the same thing every time so I feel relaxed. It's easy to understand.
>
> (School 4, female Year 5 student, author's translation)

This feeling of ease appears to be related to the teachers' use of routine and repetition, and we can therefore consider this the successful management of affect surrounding the introduction and use of the NL.

'Tight transitions'

One of the main features of all these teachers' classes that differed from other classes with high OL use was the pacing of the activities. Just as the teachers made strong use of routines, these routines were often conducted one after another, starting with the warm-up routines and moving into lesson content. In order to keep the energy of the class moving, teachers would quickly switch from one activity to the next, often using simple songs to transition the activities. In previous investigations of classroom practice (Lemov 2010), the principle of

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organizing classes around fast-paced changes in activity using well-practised routines has been labelled 'tight transitions'.

In tight transitions classes, the pacing of the class is designed to prevent students from getting off-task or otherwise distracted. Whether the changes involved whole-class–teacher interaction or individual pair work, students benefitted from this pacing by the fact that they had little time to use their OL for non-class related purposes. In all of the observed classes, teachers prepared activities to flow one into the next. Cards were prepared for quick presentation, projector slides and digital white board activities were readied before class, and several of the teachers posted the class activity flow on the board.

Maintaining a constant high level of activity, English native-speaker Teacher E worked with his Japanese counterpart to move activities forward and to prevent peaks and valleys in student engagement. The flow of activities was set so that this teacher would hand off the activities to his Japanese counterpart, who would ask questions in English, demonstrate the activity, or do pattern practice while Teacher E prepared the next activity on the computer. While Teacher E presented the NL, lead physical games, and interacted with students, Teacher F would post magnetic cards on the blackboard or count and organize game cards. By carefully organizing and coordinating activity timing, these teachers kept students experiencing the NL for the vast majority of the class time.

In the North American schools, all three teachers made extensive use of digital white boards to organize class transitions. Classes contained large amounts of NL media, videos, and slides designed to draw student interest and facilitate progress. The teachers could teach primarily using the NL with support from digital media, without requiring students to wait while the teacher wrote on the board or prepared video or audio. Just as with the teachers in Japan who performed the preparation manually, these digitally oriented teachers used classroom resources to increase on-task behaviour while using an optimal amount of the NL through timing and pacing activities.

Conclusions

Teachers in this study were able to create a positive classroom culture where students experience a large quantity of the NL, through an environment in which the student's OL was used judiciously. While some of the classes investigated here included Japanese as a foreign language classes, the principles of successful language classes offer concrete suggestions for English EYLL classes.

Students were clearly directed towards tasks through classroom management routines and pacing, and teachers used the students' OL systematically and appropriately. As the programme goal in these schools was to promote positive affect for the foreign language (English and Japanese respectively), the paper focuses on the facilitation of NL use, rather than attempting to measure language acquisition and student output in the NL. Due to the nature of the research question and data collection, students' individual output during free production activities was unavailable for analysis, and thus was not included.

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Future research into optimal NL classrooms will need to address the direct influence of teachers' language use on students' foreign language output.

This report shares practices found in classes teaching English and Japanese as a foreign language, observed across countries with clear contextual and cultural differences. For teachers capable of using the students' own language systematically and appropriately to facilitate new language (NL) interaction in their classes, the above discussion may provide ideas for how to manage classes to allow optimal use of the NL.

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Notes

1 While other works have previously used the 'first language (L1)'/'second language (L2)' terminology, in keeping with the ideas set by Hall and Cook (2012, 2013) this paper will use the 'own language (OL)'/'new language (NL)' terminology.

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Appendix 1 Transcription conventions:

Italicized text	Japanese utterance
(Parenthesis)	English translation
:: ::	Actions

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