Examining Translanguaging in Japanese EFL Context

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Translanguaging **The dynamic bilingualism** **Abstract words** **L1,** **L2**	Translanguaging has been attracting not only bilingual class teachers but also EFL teachers in recent years. Translanguaging can be defined from theoretical and pedagogical perspectives, although "its meaning and use are still developing (Baker, 2017, p.99)." From a theoretical viewpoint, the concept of translanguaging is based on dynamic bilingualism, which assumes that "there is only one linguistic system" (Garcia, 2014, p.15). From a pedagogical perspective, it is "the planned and systematic use of two languages inside the same lesson (Baker, 2017, p. 280)." Therefore, in a well-planned translanguaging class two languages are deliberately used. Although translanguaging pedagogy was originally aimed at bilingual/ multilingual education, it is expected to be applied to EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classes (Kano, 2016). Turning to English education in Japan, how can Japanese and English be deliberately used if translanguaging works in EFL settings? Here, the author pays attention to a certain negative feature of Japanese, Japanese abstract words and concepts. Because most Japanese abstract words were invented in the Meiji Restoration era (1868-1912) due to the lack of corresponding concepts in Japanese thoughts, it seems that Japanese people have not made those words their own. This paper attempts to examine the effectiveness of translanguaging in Japanese EFL settings, focusing on the weak point of the Japanese language in terms of abstraction. The author conducted an experimental workshop, where 20 participants were requested to work on three tasks focusing on Japanese abstract words, Japanese everyday words having the same meaning as abstract words, and Japanese/English definitions of abstract words. The results showed L2 English helped the participants understand abstract concepts and at the same time the ambiguity of Japanese and explicitness of English in terms of abstraction. The author concluded that the interactive use of two languages deepens learners' understanding of abstract concepts and stimulates their linguistic ability.

Introduction

The concept of translanguaging is based on dynamic bilingualism, which advocates that "there is but one linguistic system with features that are integrated throughout" (Garcia and Wei, 2014, p.15). In this respect, translanguaging may change the general idea of language itself; it is not appropriate to say language A and language B. Garcia and Wei (2014, p. 14) explain the difference between translanguaging from the traditional view of bilingualism and the Interdependence Hypothesis posited by Cummins (1979). In the traditional view of bilingualism/multilingualism, two (or more) languages coexist autonomously in a bilingual, and so do the features of those languages. Code-switching happens between one language and the other in the bilingual speaker. From the translanguaging viewpoint, however, since there is no boundary between languages and they are all set in one linguistic system, code-switching can be a surface phenomenon; the speaker may use one of the linguistic features she/he has in an integrated linguistic system. While Baker (2017) remarks that it is difficult "to differentiate between code-switching and translanguaging" (p.98), Garcia and Wei see what seems to be code-switching as internal language practice in one linguistic system. In the same manner, whereas Cummins' Interdependence Hypothesis sounds like dynamic bilingualism/translanguaging when he assumes that cognitive academic proficiency (CALP) is common across languages underlying the surface features of L1 and L2, the hypothesis differs from translanguaging in that it still differentiates one language from the other. Dynamic bilingualism claims that "… all languages are in contact with others-being influenced by others and containing structural element from others." (p.17) Therefore, strictly speaking, the distinction between language A and language B does not make sense when we discuss translanguaging. However, it is inevitable to view languages distinctively to discuss the features of given languages as a matter of convenience.

Literature Review

Translanguaging pedagogy

The term translanguaging was coined by Cen Williams and his colleague who succeeded in teaching English and Welsh in a Welsh high school in the early 1980s' (Baker, 2017). Cen Williams (1994, 1996) used one language for the input and the other for the output or vice versa systematically. Garcia and Kano (n.d., in Garcia and Wei, 2014) found in their study that the bilingual beginners tended to use translanguaging as "support" and sometimes "to expand their understandings" and that the experienced bilinguals tended to use translanguaging as "to enhance their existing practices" (p.86). The pattern of the former type of students is regarded as "a dependent translanguaging" and the latter tended to "translanguage independently" (p. 86). They reported one example of a bilingual beginner (girl): she reflected on her mind during an English vocabulary exercise, in which she was asked to come up with synonyms: "I couldn't think of synonyms in English…So I depended on my Japanese. [for example], we had 'use up' among the list. When I understand the word in Japanese ('消費'), an English word 'consume' came through my mind…." (p.87). They concluded that "both languages seem to be continuously activated, but to different degrees (Green, 1986; Thierry and Wu, 2007)" (p.88). This example precisely presents how the bilingual beginner uses two languages when her L1 Japanese is stronger than L2 English. In this sense, their findings can be applied to Japanese EFL settings because the linguistic condition of the bilingual beginners could be similar to that of Japanese students learning English.

The educational guideline by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport, Science and Technology (MEXT) in Japan emphasizes teaching only English in English classes, aiming at enhancing the opportunities for students to be exposed to English" (MEXT, 2009) as well as developing students' communicative competence. However, some experienced language teachers in Japan doubt the effectiveness of this method. Kano (2016) introduces Mckinley (2015) and Murata & Iino (2015) who point out the significant effect of L1 (Japanese) use in foreign language learning. She explains that as the content students are learning in L2 (English here) becomes more complex, their L1 (Japanese here) may help them understand the content. Although dynamic bilingualism is usually discussed in the framework of bilingual/multilingual education, it seems that the applicability of translanguaging to EFL classes is beginning to be a topic for discussion among scholars and educators in the relevant fields. Among "four potential advantages" by Baker (2017) of translanguaging and transliteracy (C. Baker, 2003 in Baker, 2017) these two are considered applicable to EFL circumstances. They are:

1) It may promote a deeper and fuller understanding of the subject matter.

2) It may help students develop oral communication and literacy in their weaker language. (pp. 280-282)

To make a lesson successful, a teacher chooses a language deliberately as has been explained above. In EFL settings, because "deeply understanding" the content matters most, it is presumed that students understand it better in L1 than in L2. Naturally, it does not have to be always L1 for the input and L2 for the output but as the example the bilingual beginner mentioned above presented, L1 use is considered to be the first step in EFL classes. Then, however, what if L1 (Japanese) is not useful to understand the content? When students are required to understand complex ideas or concepts in English, students should understand those complex and difficult ideas in Japanese first so that they can familiarize themselves with those concepts. However, what if those ideas are rather confusing for Japanese learners to grasp the meanings than comprehensible? It may happen due to a certain feature of Japanese: Japanese abstract words and their concepts. The author will explain why she thinks so by reviewing the history of the Japanese language and suggesting Japanese abstract words as obstacles for Japanese students.

History of Japanese abstract words

Until around the middle of the fourth century to the early fifth century when Chinese characters were imported, the Japanese language did not have its writing system (Ooshima, 2006). From those Chinese characters (logographic), now known as *Kanji,* Japanese people invented two writing systems: *Hiragana* and *Katakana* (phonographic) characters. All of them remain in the modern Japanese writing system. Through this process, only Chinese characters were used to learn Buddhism and Confucianism. This means that the original Japanese is not appropriate to explain logical and abstract concepts. (Nakamura, 1983). That is, Japanese people used only Chinese origin characters for abstract concepts, which remain the same. Nakamura points out that original Japanese words are poor at nominalization: constructing nouns from adjectives was not well established. Next, it was the Meiji Restoration era which saw a bunch of new idiomatic abstract words using Chinese origin characters. Japanese intellects translated tons of books written in Western languages because Japan had to catch up with Western society. While translating those books, they encountered unfamiliar concepts, which are mostly abstract ones such as "society", "liberty", "love" and the like (Yanabu, 1982). While they managed to understand the meanings of

the Western concepts, they could not find corresponding words in Japanese. Then, they had to make new idiomatic abstract words using Chinese origin characters.

This fact indicates that the words and their concepts are not rooted in the Japanese way of thinking. Of course, it was beneficial for Japanese people to have been able to read Western books in Japanese. However, those abstract words have remained open to interpretation, which is a problem. Scholars or literary people such as a sociologist and critic Ikutaro Shimizu (1959), one of Japan's prolific writers Yukio Mishima (1973) and an established translator Akira Yanabu (1972, 1982) point out Japanese people's vague understandings of abstract words created in Meiji period. Mishima notes that those created abstract words tend to deviate from the original concepts and that what we have gained from those Chinese (foreign) words is the conceptual flexibility rather than the strictness and rigour of the concepts of those words. Hence, Japanese people have been conceptionally confused with those words (p.37). Yanabu (1972) explains why Japanese abstract words are ambiguous. According to his analysis, in essence, abstract words are used to think but Japanese people have accepted them as ready-made completed items since the Meiji era. As a result, they would stop thinking in the middle of the thinking process without reaching a full understanding of the concepts. In other words, they think shallowly.

Also, the fact that many Japanese abstract words were created in the early Meiji period indicates that those Japanese abstract words do not connect to Japanese people's everyday life and because of this Japanese people are still socio-psychologically unfamiliar with those words. Japanese abstract words have long been obstacles for Japanese people to think deeply and logically.

Unlike English or other European languages, which are based on colloquial languages and letters are placed secondary (Jespersen, 1924; Bloomfield, 1933 in Suzuki, 2017), Japanese people regard letters (written Japanese) as more valuable than colloquial Japanese and that the difference between spoken and written Japanese is quite huge. Japanese abstract words are majorly used in written Japanese and Japanese people tend to use everyday words to denote abstract concepts in their everyday life. In this linguistic circumstance, when Japanese students try to understand abstract concepts in English, it does not seem to be a good strategy for them to depend on corresponding Japanese abstract words.

Research Questions

In summary, from the viewpoint of translanguaging, it is considered to be effective for bilinguals to use two languages to maximize the learner's linguistic ability and this should be done deliberately at school. Within the framework of EFL education, in most cases, when the content is difficult or complex, using the learner's L1 is beneficial to deeply understand the content. If it can be applied to EFL classes in Japan, then Japanese students are encouraged to use Japanese to understand the content before challenging content in English. However, when it comes to abstract concepts, if Japanese students use Japanese for the input, it does not seem to work. Instead, Japanese students may understand the content better in English rather than in their native language. When their L1 is not helpful for them to understand the abstract concepts, learners' use of L2 English may help them. Or there might be a possibility for Japanese learners to understand abstract concepts within the domain of the Japanese language itself since abstract words can be reworded or paraphrased by Japanese everyday words or expressions. Taking those ideas into consideration, the author posited two research questions (RQ) as follows.

RQ-1: Do participants understand abstract concepts in the same way only with their L1(Japanese) knowledge: abstract words and everyday words.

RQ-2: When L1 (Japanese) abstract words are considered to be weak in terms of definitiveness, then can L2 (English here), which is considered to be strong in logicality, complement their understanding of abstract concepts?

Methodology

To examine these two questions above, the author conducted an experimental workshop in a study group's online meeting organized by ESTEEM (Elementary School Study Group Thematic English Education Movement), where the author as a facilitator was allowed to give some tasks to the participants. The followings are the detailed information about participants, materials and procedures.

Participants

20 participants who are teaching at elementary school (teaching most subjects), at university (teaching English) and the like.

Materials

14 Japanese abstract words and 14 everyday words shown in Tables 1 and 2 were selected from "academic logical vocabularies" (1962, Yuko Takebe) in "Gengo-yoso Shido (Instruction of Linguistic Elements)," in which 70 academic logical words and corresponding everyday words are listed.

Procedure

The participants are asked to do the following three tasks. The tasks were designed to examine if the participants evoke the same or similar abstract words when they are given the same meaning everyday words or vice versa, and to examine if there is any difference between the English definition and the Japanese one. In Task 1, if they understand the abstract words in the same way, then their output everyday words would be the same or similar. In Task 2, if they can think of abstract words by looking at the same meaning in everyday words, their evocation would be the same. Task 3 aimed to see which definitions of the abstract words are comprehensible to them, Japanese or English. They are allowed to use Japanese-Japanese dictionaries and English-Japanese dictionaries. In Tables 1 and 2, English abstract words translated from Japanese ones are also listed.

Task 1: First, the participants were asked to change seven Japanese abstract words shown in

Table 1 into everyday words which are not shown until everyone answers.

Task 2: Next, the participants were asked to change seven everyday words into

abstract ones which are not shown until everyone answers.

Task 3: Finally, the participants were asked to choose either of the definitions of two abstract

words in English and Japanese have shown in Table 3 in terms of understandability.

Table 1

Task 1: Everyday Words and Abstract Words (Japanese) for Task 1

Everyday Words → Abstract Words		(English Translation)
Tachi	*Honshitus*	Essence
Arinomama	*Genjitus*	Reality
Hataraki	*Kinou*	Function
Shikumi	*Kozo*	Structure
Shiru	*Wakaru*	Cognition
Kotoba	*Genin*	Concept
Hontou	*Shinri,Shinjitsu*	Truth

Table 2

Abstract Words and Everyday Words (Japanese) for Task 2

Abstract Words → Everyday Words		(English Translation)
Ronri	*Rikutsu*	Logic
Bunseki	*Wakeru*	Analyze
Shukann	*Jibun no kangae*	Subjective
Kasetsu	*Karini, Tatoeba*	Hypothesis
Chusho	*Nukidasu*	Abstract
Handan	*Mikiwameru,Miwakeru*	Judgement
Suisoku	*Darou to omou*	Inference

Table 3

The Definitions of the Abstract Words in English and Japanese for Task 3

Abstract words	English Definitions	English Translations from Japanese
Essence	the most basic and important quality of something	the distinctive property that forms something as being itself
Cognition	the process of knowing, understanding and learning something	the natural process through which a human being knows things and their content

Results and Discussion

The results suggested the answer to RQ 1 was negative. The results showed the vagueness of Japanese abstract words as well as everyday words. As for RQ2, the answer was positive. 19 of 20 participants chose the English definitions instead of Japanese ones. Regarding Task 1 (changing everyday words to abstract words), their answers varied. Many of them came up with various abstract words or meanings from those everyday words. While there are some same and similar answers in several participants, they are not the majority. In the same way, their responses to Task 2 (changing abstract words to everyday words) had varieties of interpretations. Lastly, their feedback on Task 3 clearly showed the English definitions are more comprehensible to them. Later, the author did task 3 to nine university students and they responded the same.

The fact that the participants tend to evoke various images from the same abstract words represents how Japanese abstract words can be comprehended in various ways. In addition, with the result that even Japanese everyday words were not connected to specific abstract words, we could see the flexibility and ambiguity in Japanese words regardless of abstract words or everyday words. One of the reasons the author can think of is that in addition to the suggestions of Shmizu, Mishima, and Yanabu mentioned above, Japanese abstract words are still new: they began to be used only 150 years ago. It takes much more time for a language to take root in a society and truly become the people's own words. On the other hand, from the fact that the participants found English definitions of two abstract words more comprehensive than Japanese ones we should learn that English abstract words are rooted in their everyday life so they can be explained in easy words. To conclude, three tasks showed Japanese abstract words are weak and ambiguous and there is a possibility of utilizing English to help learners fully understand abstract concepts.

The author noticed certain characteristics in the definitions of abstract words found in a couple of Japanese-Japanese dictionaries and English-English dictionaries. Japanese definitions tend to be complex using other abstract words to explain the meanings of the words. For example, regarding the term "logic," English definitions are 1) a way of thinking or explaining something and 2) sensible reasons for doing something. Japanese definitions are (literally translated from Japanese) 1) the form of thoughts or rules, 2) the connection of thoughts/concepts based on rules. As you may notice that English definitions are much simpler than Japanese ones. The Japanese include

other abstract words like form (形式), thought (思考) concept (概念), all of which Japanese do not likely use in their everyday life.

Conclusion

According to translanguaging pedagogy, it is suggested to use two languages deliberately to maximize the learner's linguistic ability. In EFL settings, using L1 is effective for learners to comprehend complex contents, which usually include abstract words and their concepts. In this paper, however, it is suggested that L2 can be effective when L1 is weak in terms of semantic clarity. Using Japanese may not help Japanese students understand abstract concepts because of the ambiguity and vagueness of Japanese abstract words, but rather a hindrance. On the other hand, the result that participants deepened their understanding of abstract concepts with the help of English might imply that they used both languages. They may have deepened their understanding of Japanese abstract concepts as well by understanding English definitions. If so, then translanguaging is working here. Learners can utilize whatever knowledge they have to make meaning. In other words, learners naturally use a strong feature in their linguistic repertoires, which cannot be separated from one language from the other.

To conclude, it is suggested that Japanese students should be aware of the vagueness of Japanese abstract words in the first place and try to understand their essential meanings of them in Japanese to develop their native language, which leads to developing their English ability in the long run. Translanguaging theory suggests that language features are integrated into one linguistic system. Then, going back and forth between L1 and L2, in the given case of Japanese and English, can lead students to a deeper understanding of contents in both languages to broaden their linguistic capacity.

Implications

There are some limitations to this research. Firstly, in terms of reliability, twenty participants are statistically not good enough to generalize the findings. So, it may be early to conclude that when L1 is weak, L2 can help learners understand the concepts. It can be said, however, that Japanese abstract words are difficult to grasp the meanings for Japanese themselves and English is helpful for Japanese learners to understand abstract concepts. Secondly, the number of Japanese/English abstract words are too small. Since some of the participants are elementary school teachers, it was thought that reading and understanding English definitions might have been challenging for them. On the other hand, those elementary school teachers were very good at using children's Japanese-Japanese dictionaries. One of the unexpected findings is that the definitions in children's dictionaries are a little more precise and comprehensible than in dictionaries for adults. Japanese abstract words can be defined in everyday words to a certain degree but there seems to be some room to fill the gap between children and adults in age-related cognition.

At times L2 use can help learners enhance their linguistic ability when L1 use is not helpful to deepen the learner's comprehension. This might be applied to other contexts. For example, the Japanese are not only weak at abstract words and their concepts but also logical writing. When a learner tries to write an English essay, the Japanese writing style cannot be helpful to write an essay in English in a coherent manner. In such a case, the learner should rely more on the English writing style without referring to the Japanese writing style, which might affect his/her Japanese writing.

For further research, a more rigorous research design would be desirable. By increasing the number of abstract words and using a comprehension scale (0 to 4 for example), the survey would see more reliable results. If participants understand many more English abstract words with English definitions, then it is expected that they will deepen their understanding of Japanese abstract words, too. The underlying concept here is that language learners can utilize any linguistic features regardless of L1 or L2.

In this research, the author focused on the Japanese language and English, especially abstract words. However, the idea of using L2 for the input when L1 is weak in terms of a certain feature may be applied to any language pair, depending on linguistic conditions.

The concept of translanguaging has been explored more and more gaining much attention from both bilingual and monolingual foreign language education fields. It is hoped that more data on practicing translanguaging will show us the direction of effective language teaching/learning.

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