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Reflections on translanguaging practices in English education in Japan

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Abstract

This study is a reflection on critical incidents (Tripp, 1993) addressing the use and promotion of a learner's first language (L1) and cultural knowledge as linguistic and cognitive resources for learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Japan. Translanguaging, which was first introduced by Cen Williams (1994) to refer to the practice of interchanging languages in the classroom for productive use, was investigated to provide a deeper understanding of what seems to be relatively common practice across Japan. This paper outlines to fit with the broader study area of a larger collaborative inquiry involving university-based researchers providing English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in Japan. This paper outlines the background of English education in Japan and considers its current state to study possible additions and changes in the broader curricula.

Keywords: translanguaging, bilingual, first language, Japan, EFL

Introduction

In 2009, Benesse Educational Research and Development found that virtually all Japanese parents wished their children would be able to acquire English to some extent at elementary school. 18.8% answered that their children were studying English outside of school. Conversely, only 4.9% of parents who had elementary school children in Japan did not feel the need of having their children learn English. To summarize, approximately 95% of Japanese parents saw the importance of their children learning English. Presently, many Japanese companies require their employees to have high scores on the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) or the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) tests. In 2009, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) released the English Education Reform Plan "in order to promote the establishment of an educational environment which corresponds to

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globalization from the elementary to lower/upper secondary education stage" (MEXT, 2014, p. 1). Not only has English education become compulsory from the third grade, but teachers have been required to teach classes that are "conducted in English with high-level linguistic activities (presentations, debates, negotiations)", in "all-English" classes (MEXT, 2014, p. 2).

However, even after the English education reform, not many Japanese are comfortable with their speaking abilities. According to the *ALC Actual Situation of English Education Report* (2016), 98.5% of high school students that participated in the research scored a range of 2 to 4 out of 10 (p. 12). Level 2 means that students can greet using phrases and fragmentally talk about daily life using simple vocabularies and idioms. Level 4 means that students can form simple sentences and briefly talk about one's studies and school life to maintain the minimum necessary conversations. It seems reasonable to conclude that to "nurture the ability to understand abstract contents for a wide range of topics and the ability to fluently communicate with English speaking persons" (MEXT, 2014, p. 3), more needs to be done. In this paper, we will review the background of English education in Japan, followed by a literature review on translanguaging. The reflections from the authors' experiences will be included in the conversation to extend the discussion. Finally, the paper concludes with recommendations for focused use of translanguaging in institutions across Japan.

Background of English education in Japan

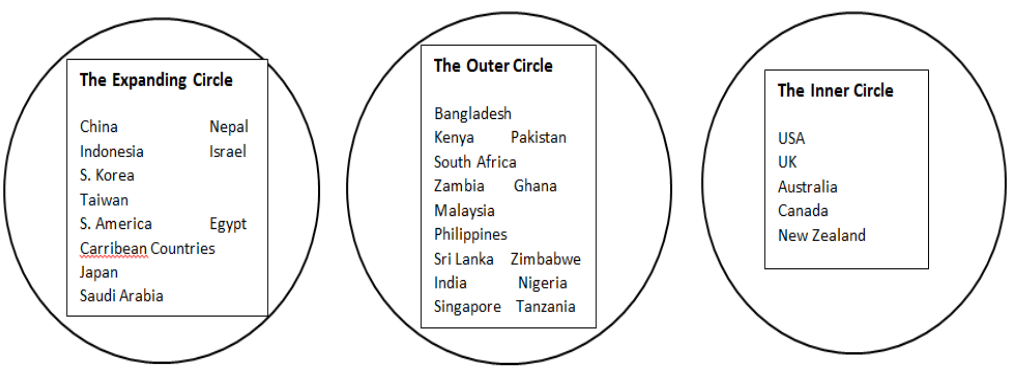
Looking at English education in Japan, in the article: *Education Minister Proposes English Education for 3rd Grade* (2014), Education Minister Hakubun Shimomura proposed revised curriculum guidelines to "make Japan more competitive on the global stage" (para. 5.), and he hoped that "junior high students will develop their English capability to the point that by the time they are seniors, they will be able to make presentations in near native-level English, as well as partake in challenging debates with their fellow students" (Para. 6.). Although the English Education Reform Plan aims to have students be able to "fluently communicate with native English-speaking persons" (MEXT, 2014), the education ministry hoped that students would acquire "near native-level English" (Para. 6.). The minister failed to articulate whether or not these "English speaking persons" constitute those who exist within what Kachru (1987) calls the "inner-circle", "outer-circle", or "expanding circle" (Figure 1).

In Japan, many schools tend to have Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) or Assistant English Teachers (AETs). An ALT is a foreign national

working in a Japanese classroom assisting the Japanese teacher with English. ALTs must have at least an undergraduate degree; however, they are usually not licensed teachers. ALTs undertake a variety of duties with their responsibilities varying widely dependent on the board of education or private sector entity that employs them; for example, some are involved with lesson planning and before and after school clubs. The title of "assistant" is often misleading, as in elementary schools, it is often the ALT that leads English classes. However, as the age of students increase, the appropriate use of an ALT is dependent on the Japanese teacher or school administration. ALTs work in The Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme (JET) program, which is the largest of such programs in the world. Moreover, the JET Programme is a Japanese government initiative that employs over 5700 ALTs a year from 57 countries (JET Program USA, 2021, p. 2). If we take a look at the eligibility for the JET program, it says that applicants must "be adept in contemporary standard pronunciation, rhythm and intonation in the designated language (e.g., English for those applying from English-speaking countries)" (JET Program USA, 2021, p. 8). According to Matsuda (2003), Japanese secondary school students "perceive English as an international language in a sense that it is being used internationally, they do not believe it belongs internationally" (p. 484.). Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that Japanese people tend to see English spoken by inner-circle people as desirable English, and the goal of learning English would be to be able to speak like them.

Figure 1

Concentric Circle Model - Adapted from Kachru (1997)



Literature Review

How L1 is treated in classrooms

Most English classes taught in Japan, both in high school and in university, tend to focus on the monolingual instruction of English when a non-Japanese teacher is teaching (Carson & Kashihara, 2012). Often students who have something to say, but cannot say it fluently in English, are most often told to use simple English rather than using Japanese but will not out of concern of being humiliated (Nation, 2003; Meyer, 2008). In such settings, code-switching is valuable, but many educators have the sense that code-switching shows inadequate L2 skill (Hawkins, 2015). When a Japanese teacher is teaching, in some cases, they tend to minimise the use of English in the classroom adding to student confusion about how they should be communicating. This is most often caused from a lack of confidence a Japanese teacher may have while using English in an English class (Nishino, 2011). In a country like Japan, where students have very little opportunity to use English outside the classroom, teachers who tend to see the use of the L1 as taking away from the Second Language (L2) may see the L1 usage negatively (Yonesaka, 2005). Additionally, a general lack of pedagogical knowledge for creating communicative classes based on experiential learning many Japanese teachers have had (i.e. grammar focus over communication focus) often guides how many teach English themselves in their careers (Nishimuro & Borg, 2013).

Therefore, the two major issues that seem to exist in English education in Japan are that it aims to have students acquire inner-circle English and that teachers and students perceive using the L1 (in this case Japanese) in classrooms as undesirable. However, considering the growing number of bilingual people in the world, including not only people in the outer-circle, but also in the expanding circle, English language learners should first move on from looking at inner-circle English as the only desired English. This paper considers the way individuals look at L1 usage in Japanese K-12 English classrooms. Additionally, the paper will mainly focus on the latter issue that English education in Japan faces, which is the mixed usage of L1 and L2 in classrooms.

The role of L1 in English classes

Iida (2014) argues that in Japan, some people believe that “all-English” classes are superior to those in which both Japanese and English are used because “more exposure to English in the classroom is important for the improvement of English skills” (p. 3). However, this last point is not always

true. Iida (2014) argues that using the L1 in an English class plays an important role (p. 3). For instance, the L1 plays a role in cognitive tool function during a task-based group, which enables students to use the knowledge when learning English (p.3). Yukawa (2016) claims that the use of a L1 can be a scaffolding tool to complete cognitively challenging tasks while Ortega (2007) argues that the use of L1 in classrooms can be effective in internalizing differences between the L1 and L2 as well as understanding explanations of grammar. Also, recent research shows that "new language practices only emerge in interrelationship with old language practices"; therefore, English classes should be "creating opportunities for students to use their entire linguistic repertoire and not just part of it to develop bilingualism and/or develop language practices that conform to the academic uses of language in school, as well as to learn rigorous content" (Hesson, Seltzer, & Woodley, 2014, p. 3). Consequently, it can be stated that using both a L1 and a L2 language in a classroom will benefit learners positively towards their second language acquisition.

Lin (2013) introduced a case in Hong Kong, where a junior high school teacher in a science class used English as medium of instruction while allowing students to practice translanguaging in their science journals. The teacher had been using science journals to encourage her students to engage in scientific inquiry at home and later shared it with other students. She allowed the students to use Chinese when they ran out of L2 resources, so the students could express their ideas to the fullest without being restricted by language. At the same time, the students were provided with L2 sentences that were needed to express their ideas in English in the margins, so that they could express similar ideas in the future in English. Rather than forcing the students to only use English, she encouraged them to expressing their ideas freely and fluently, while not losing excitement in writing and discussing their scientific inquiry. Although she assisted the students' writings in English by providing students' ideas in the margins of their journals and shared some suggestions and language tips for writing in English in a whole class setting, she focused most on encouraging students to express their budding ideas using their full linguistic resources. This allowed students to learn the content knowledge and English by using their full communicative resources.

The concept of translanguaging

As demonstrated in Lin (2013), one concept that teachers can bring into the classroom is the concept of translanguaging. Translanguaging is a multilingual speaker's "flexible use of their complex linguistic resources to make meaning of their lives and their complex worlds" (Hesson, Seltzer, &

Woodley, 2014, p.1). Moreover, translanguaging is the "act performed by bilinguals of accessing different linguistic features or various modes of what are described as autonomous language, in order to maximize communicative potential" (García, 2009, p. 140). Additionally, this 'communicative potential' of using language and artifacts flexibly across languages is what is referred to as metalinguistic awareness. Metalinguistic awareness, moreover, can be useful when explaining the implementation and transference of linguistic understanding regarding code switching too.

Translanguaging is different from code-switching, which some Japanese teachers and students see used because of inadequate English skills. According to Hesson, Seltzer, & Woodley (2014), code-switching "assumes that the two languages of bilinguals are two separate monolingual codes that could be used without reference to each other", whereas translanguaging "posits that bilinguals have one linguistic repertoire from which they select features strategically to communicate effectively" (p.1). In other words, if multilinguals use different languages together, it can be called translanguaging, and this skill can be an effective tool for learning. Therefore, it should not be seen as failure, and teachers should not feel "guilty" when they use their L2 in the classroom. Moreover, the most important skill that bilinguals and multilinguals should have in the 21st century is the ability "to use language fluidly, to translanguage in order to make meaning beyond one or two languages" (2014, p. 2). Furthermore, translanguaging "builds the flexibility in language practices that would make students want to try out other language practices, increasing the possibilities of becoming multilingual, of reaching out through technology to others, of expanding their universe and local situations" (Hesson, Seltzer, & Woodley, 2014, p. 2). Therefore, translanguaging is a notion for educators to be cognizant of, when regarding English classrooms not just in Japan, but in countries where English is used as an L1.

Methodological approach

Critical incident reflection is a useful practice in the context of teacher education as it is a way that teachers can share "stories of teacher's professional development within their own professional worlds" (Johnson and Golombek, 2002, p. 6). Additionally, as Farrell says (2013), reflections of "specific classroom events and experiences such as incidents that teachers deem critical for their professional development" (p. 81) is of the utmost importance for this paper specifically. Moreover, a critical incident does not have to be a dramatic experience. This paper is composed of reflections based on incidents in our own teaching as well as in the literature and this is

echoed in research done by Halquist and Musanti (2010) "In order to turn an event into a critical incident, we do more than simply categorize or label it. We investigate some of the underlying structures that produce that kind of incident" (p. 450). In order to help us reflect on our own practices, we will discuss a study of a classroom that applied translanguaging conducted in Japan.

Translanguaging study conducted in Japan

Yukawa (2016) described a university English-medium seminar class that used translanguaging. The study was conducted at a university in the western part of Japan in 2014, and the participants were members of a seminar class that the author was teaching. There were ten, third year students, and nine fourth year students, as well as two graduate students that were Teacher Assistants (n=21). For the seniors, they had a parallel course in which they had individual guidance in Japanese with their research and graduation thesis. All the participants' L1 was Japanese except for one Chinese student who had moved to Japan for university, and their L2 was English. The seminar course was designed for students that were interested in English education and bilingualism, and approximately 50% of the students had experiences studying abroad for more than nine months. Additionally, the students who enrolled in the course had higher English skills than students in high school, or students enrolled in other courses since the course was the highest-level course at the undergraduate level. The author is a bilingual (L1 Japanese and L2 English), and she instructed the course mainly in English using Japanese, as necessary. She explained the purpose of translanguaging to support Japanese students who have deficient English, and she used various techniques to explain/rephrase problematic ideas that appeared in student presentations. She posits that listing important and difficult points and concepts on a board is valid when wanting to get ideas across to the students (Yukawa, 2016, p. 50). This helps prepare students as they try to understand concepts in the L2 while using their L1 to support their ideas.

Findings from the seminar

In the seminar class, students were required to acquire the knowledge of each specific area regarding English education and bilingualism and design their graduation thesis that would be written in English. They were also required to conduct their research individually with the guidance of the instructor and present their achievements in front of other members of the seminar occasionally. Throughout the course, Yukawa (2016) highlighted eight types of students' L1 use (see Table 1). Type 1 was the use of L1

translation from L2 to L1 to help students' comprehension, type 2 was use of L1 to attract listeners' attention, and type 3 was use of L1 words specific to Japanese culture or the course, and type 4 was use of L1 as a direct quotation. Type 5 was use of L1 due to a lack of corresponding English ability, type 6 was use of L1 in response to the previous speaker, and type 7 was use of L1 as private discussions among students themselves with their neighboring students. Lastly, type 8 was an end of class discussion done entirely in L1. From these 8 types of L1 use in her seminar class, it was demonstrated that the use of a L1 does not occur due to insufficient L2 skills. The study also found that the parallel course offered in Japanese helped students with their EMI class as students could discuss their research in Japanese in the parallel course. The authors argue that strategic L1 use would be beneficial, but it only works when students in the classroom share the same L1.

Table 1

Yukawa's eight types of L1

Type	Function
1	Use of L1 or translation from L2 to L1 to ease students' comprehension
2	Use of L1 to give a strong impact and/or attract listeners' attention
3	Use of L1 words peculiar to Japanese culture or to this particular course
4	Use of L1 sentences/phrases as a direct quotation of an imaginary/real speaker
5	Use of L1 words/phrases due to lack of corresponding English expressions/words in the speaker's English repertoire
6	Use of L1 in accordance with the previous speaker
7	Use of L1 as private 'off stage' talks
8	Complete switch to L1 at the end of the class to activate discussion

Adapted from Yukawa (2016)

Results

In the questionnaire that students filled out, it showed that all the participants found that the L1 used on the blackboard assisted in comprehension. Moreover, every student except for one found the

instructor's L1 usage helpful. One of the comments was, "If they had to do it all in English, even the ones who have full understanding may have difficulty in explaining to others. I believe that a few minutes of 'off stage' session in Japanese is useful and should form the relevant schema for the topic as well" (Yukawa, 2016, p. 68). This is an example that proves "prohibiting" Japanese completely in class limits students' learning. The study also shows that "L1 use was necessary for most students and was used strategically" (Yukawa, 2016, p. 52). Moreover, the use of L1 is useful and necessary even for the university students that are taking one of the highest-level courses.

Reflection about our own practice

In this section, we will reflect on our own practices regarding translanguaging to explore translanguaging in our local context. There has been a recent shift to move from quantitative studies to qualitative studies in attempting to understand students' perspectives of translanguaging. In these observational accounts from the teachers, we aim to construct a detailed description of a central phenomenon.

Author's 1 Reflection

I am a Japanese English teacher living in Japan. Currently, I teach at a private university using translanguaging in my classroom because of positive experiences I have had as a learner myself. I have been in an English course where the instructor of the course encouraged the use of translanguaging in Japan. The pedagogical approach the instructor used, which promoted translanguaging helped me with understanding the context, and it allowed the students to "maximize communicative potential" (García, 2009, p. 140). I even felt empowered that they were able to communicate in different languages freely, and I did not have to feel inadequate by not being able to understand and express myself all in English. It can be argued that it allowed me to see myself as a multicompetent speaker (Pavlenko, 2003) rather than a deficient speaker of English. During the course in which some of the 8 types of L1 use introduced in Yukawa's (2016) study were used, I had a positive learning experience in the classroom because of the L1 use. Since the positive experience I had as a learner and research supporting the effectiveness of translanguaging in L2 classrooms I studied, I started using translanguaging when I moved back to Japan from Canada after my graduate studies ceased, where I was unable to use my L1 to teach English due to different languages I shared with my students.

When I teach, I use all the types of L1 (1 to 8) introduced by Yukawa (2016). For example, when I explain and give feedback on student essays, I

use L1 to provide more in-depth explanation and feedback. Students often tell me that when they get feedback on their writing in English from other teachers, they are not clear what they are asked to revise, but with Japanese instruction, they are able to understand what exactly they need to work on. In addition, other types of L1 use such as type 2 is used when I want to get students' attention switching from English to Japanese suddenly; alternatively, I see the effectiveness when I switch to Japanese, as students look at me and listen well. Moreover, type 5 is used when I tell my students to discuss a reading they are assigned. Often, students have a good understanding of the reading, but are unable to discuss it in English, and they cannot deepen their understanding with their peers through discussion due to their lack of proficiency in English. However, as Iida (2014) argues, by allowing them to use Japanese, they can have an in-depth discussion on the topic with the cognitive tool function that their L1 plays. Nevertheless, as much as the positive feedback students have about translanguaging, some students still seem to believe that "all-English" classes which provide more exposure to English in the classroom are superior to classrooms in which both English and Japanese are used. I believe that more initiatives to promote the use of translanguaging need to be implemented.

Author's 2 Reflection

I taught English in Japan for just under eight years. During that time, I taught one year at elementary schools, five years at middle schools, and three years at high schools. Additionally, in the tertiary domain, I taught at five universities as a part-time teacher over a five-year period, and two years full-time at one university.

Regarding my experience teaching in Japan, related to translanguaging, Japanese was often used in classrooms mainly out of necessity. In much of my experience, especially teaching students who is English L2 levels were beginner to intermediate, students used translanguaging to accomplish various goals. These goals ranged from simply understanding daily class outcomes, explaining definitions, textbook chapter purposes and goals, and to generally understand what I wanted the students to do. Therefore, the L1 became a tool that I could use to aid my pedagogical practice, rather than hinder it. Many classes I taught were made up of beginner level Japanese students; hence, I used Japanese in class to accommodate student learning and understanding. However, it could be the case that many non-Japanese teachers cannot speak Japanese well enough to make significant connections between the L1 and the L2. I noticed when observing non-Japanese teachers' classes that those who were fluent in Japanese often did a great job teaching the target content if they were fluent

in both Japanese and English. Of course, this was dependent on the student English ability level, in my experience the more advanced my students were, the less Japanese I used.

Additionally, after spending several years in Japan, I became aware of the fear many students had both due to a lack of fluency and culture. When I mention "culture", I specifically mean the general behaviour Japanese students have of not wanting to stick out, either out of fear of being embarrassed from making a mistake in public or being a fluent to exceptional English speaker. Often, I found myself wondering how to increase student involvement while establishing a positive classroom experience for everyone. Moreover, if various lesson procedures and objectives were to be conveyed, I sometimes used Japanese as necessary if it facilitated the L2 growth within the class as a group or to an individual student. In this way, translanguaging brought linguistic depth to the classes when I taught in Japan. As found in previous studies (e.g., Lin, 2013; Yukawa, 2016), considering that translanguaging can enrich students' learning by utilizing students' full linguistic repository, then I would argue that it needs to be considered for use in English classrooms in Japan and in other countries.

Conclusion

The project aimed to provide descriptions of translanguaging practices that were implemented in classrooms, and at analysing the effects they had on EFL students' literacy engagement and learning, with a view to enhancing existing practices and innovating new ones. We argue that translanguaging can work negatively when the classroom L1 is not taken into consideration, but it can also enhance students' learning greatly when used as an asset and done properly. Especially, in environments like Japanese classrooms where students share the same L1, we believe that not only does translanguaging enhance students' learning, but it also helps them construct a positive identity as a multicompetent speaker rather than inadequate speaker of English. The findings from this paper suggest that teachers who adopt a translanguaging stance in their classrooms using students L1 resources effectively integrate students' culture and language into classroom learning, bringing about increased participation, engagement and confidence when doing literacy work.

The present paper aimed to address the following questions: Are classes completely conducted in English really the best option to nurture students' communicative ability in English? Is the use of L1 Japanese in English class a result of inadequate L2 skills? Should inner-circle English be

considered as desirable language that students should aim to acquire? In this paper, we have tried to address the answers to these questions. Additionally, the question of whether the use of L1 is not harmless in L2 learning or adds positive outcomes to students' learning is debatable. Also, in this era of globalization, the most important skill that students should develop is not "native like" English speaking skills. Therefore, what is crucial are the meaning-making skills to negotiate the meanings of what is going on around them. To get these skills, translanguaging should be promoted in classrooms more as it enhances knowledge in learners with different levels of L2 and helps them prepare for the future when they go out and use English in the real world. It is admirable that Japanese English education has been changing for the better. However, to make the most of it, educators and learners need to change their false assumptions about English and L1 use. We believe that in the future, there will be more classrooms applying translanguaging, and that there will be more positive changes in English education in Japan from it.

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INDONESIAN JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING (INDONESIAN JELT) SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

AIMS AND SCOPE

Indonesian Journal of English Language Teaching (Indonesian JELT) is a peer-reviewed journal in which submitted articles will go through a blind review process. IJELT is published twice a year in May and in October every year. It is devoted to the teaching and learning of English. It also invites articles related to language evaluation. Committed to finding the solution to problems associated with the study of English Language Teaching (ELT), Indonesian JELT strongly encourages submission of unpublished articles on topics that are highly relevant and contribute significantly to issues in ELT. The journal particularly welcomes manuscripts that are drawn from research related to other cross-disciplines (e.g. linguistics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, education, culture as well as first and second language acquisition), the application of theories, critical analysis of theories or studies.

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- Articles must be written in English and should be related to the areas of English language teaching, learning or testing. Articles in the area of applied linguistics are welcome, provided that they are relevant to ELT.
- The Indonesian JELT also invites *review articles*, which provide a descriptive and evaluative comparison of the materials and discuss the relative significance of the works in the context of current theory and practice. Submissions should generally be between 700 and 1,500 words.
- Articles must be typewritten on A4-sized white paper (8.27" x 11.69"), double-spaced with 1" margins with a 12-pt Times New Roman font.
- The Editors require that articles be submitted as e-mail attachment that exactly matches the hardcopy and are formatted as a Microsoft Word document. Identify your document with your own name and affiliation, e.g. Yassir_ATMAJAYA.doc. Do not send your text in the body of e-mail.
- The Editors reserve the rights to adjust the format to certain standards of uniformity.
- Clear corresponding address of the author should be identified (also with a fax and/or contact number). In the case of multiple authorship, full postal addresses must be given for all co-authors. Names will appear in the order in which the corresponding authors give them, even if that order is not alphabetical.

Paper Length

Texts should be between 6,000 and 7,000 words in length. A word-count should be given at the end of the article. The word-count should include abstract, tables and appendices.

Abstracts

All articles should have an abstract comprising 100-250 words in length. A word-count and keywords are required at the end of the abstract.

Criteria for Acceptance

A manuscript will be accepted for publication if it meets the following requirements:

- Its topic and contents reflect the aims and scope of the Indonesian JELT.
- It is likely to arouse readers' interest and is accessible to a broad readership.
- It offers novel and original insights as well as makes significant contribution to the body of knowledge related to this journal.
- It contains a cogent and coherent theoretical basis so as to reflect sound scholarship (especially for practical articles). Theoretical articles and report research should include discussion and implications, and application for practice.
- It has clarity of presentation, is well written and organized, and conforms to the format of this journal.

Articles and a brief bio-data (max. 150 words) should be sent to: ijelt@atmajaya.ac.id