



Consultant advice **Herbert Puchta**

Primary ELT: The role of the students' own language

During a visit I made to a primary school in Istanbul, the coordinator told me a lovely story about a moment while, when she was teaching, the caretaker entered the classroom and told her in Turkish that he had to remove a cupboard from the class. The teacher pretended that she didn't understand. When she turned to the 8-year-old students 'for help', they didn't know what to say at first. But all of a sudden, one of the girls in the class had an idea. Proudly, she almost yelled at the teacher, 'Miss – cupboard – bye-bye!'

This shows how a teacher can challenge a class in a playful way to use English as a way to communicate even in situations when their command of the new language is not yet up to the challenge. In this specific example, the girl's idea not only gave the teacher an ideal opportunity to show the class that she had understood the message, but also gave her an opportunity to model a *proper* utterance for the situation, by saying 'Oh, I see. Mr X is going to take the cupboard out of the classroom' while using appropriate body language to support her words. It's clear that the situation was important to the language-learning process – not only of the student who'd had such a brilliant idea, but of the whole class.

Young children can be surprisingly creative both in decoding a teacher's message that is above level, and in trying to say things that they haven't learnt yet. The reasons for these abilities may have to do with the fact that they will have learnt to cope with similar situations only a few years earlier, when acquiring their own language, and may be able to draw on those strategies once again.

But it's impossible for young learners to understand everything the teacher wants to communicate to them, and to be able to express everything they want to say, and at these points it seems very natural for students to seek help in their own language. Which is, of course, acceptable and indeed on occasion essential.

However, there have been times in the history of ELT when teachers tried to *forbid* students to use their own language, and this may indeed still be the case in certain contexts – probably in not too many primary classrooms though. (I have deliberately put the word *forbid* in italics, because teachers were able to ensure that students didn't speak in their own language in the classroom – by making them stay silent. But nobody can effectively forbid them to use their own language in their heads, to make meaning of something they hear in the new language, or to *hear* in their own language what they are trying to say in the new one.)

But now, in the 21st century, things have changed. In the latest book on the use of the students' own language in the ELT classroom, Kerr (2014) stresses that 'learning is, by definition, built on previous learning, and the most significant resource that learners can bring to the language learning task is their existing linguistic knowledge – a substantial portion of which consists of knowledge about their own language. Learning is scaffolded, and, especially in the early stages of learning another language, it will be scaffolded, in part, on the language(s) they already know.'

But that doesn't mean that the students' own language should be the main medium of communication. Children need a lot of input in the new language, and the teacher is the most important model for the students. The more the teacher uses English naturally, and in such a way that students can understand him or her, the better. And nobody will deny that getting students to learn to communicate successfully in the new language is paramount.



So here are six **strategies** that have proved helpful in the young learners' classroom:

1. Make sure your students feel safe in the new learning environment, especially in the early phases of learning the new language. The use of mime and gestures, visuals, themodelling of actions you want to see from your students, and the use of realia can be important in helping students understand new words, and in aiding their comprehension. However, there will be times when you need to use the students' own language to make them feel secure, for example in helping them to understand your instructions. Don't feel guilty about that.
2. Build up a set of English instructions that students can understand. Gradually reduce the use of the students' own language and show them that they can increasingly understand your English. Remember to praise them for that.
3. After you have given your students an instruction that is a bit above level, challenge them by asking, e.g., 'Who can tell me in (your own language) what I've just said?' Another idea would be to tell them a story, and then ask them to give you the gist of what the story was about in their own language.
4. Help students acquire strategies they can use to deal with difficult situations. Make sure they know what the different phrases/sentences mean and can pronounce them well. Step by step, help them to extend their range of intervention strategies. It might be an idea to keep a log of such phrases on a classroom wall, clearly visible to everyone, as they occur. Here are examples of the kind of strategies students will find useful; prompt them to use them when appropriate, and praise them for doing so.

'I don't understand this word.'

'What's '...' in English (our own language)?'

'Say it once more, please.'

'I can't read this word.'

'Sorry, how do you spell (purple)?'

'Is this OK?'

'Can you check this for me, please?'

'Can you write it on the board, please?'

5. Use English when talking about the classroom environment. Common reference language is easy to understand, and – when used repeatedly – can easily be learnt by the students:

'It's rather hot in here today. It's hot, isn't it? Are you hot too? OK. Could someone open the window, please?'

'It's sunny in here. That's nice. I like it when it's sunny. But the sun's getting a bit too bright now. Let's draw the curtains.'

'It's a bit dark in here. Can you please switch the lights on, (Maria)?'

'We don't need the lights any more. Can someone switch them off, please?'

'Tim, there's a (pencil) under your desk. It must be yours. Is it yours? Yes? No? OK, let's see. Could you pick it up, please? Can you help me find out whose it is? Can you ask (Lisa)?'



6. Use English increasingly for small talk, too, and not just as a medium of instruction. Children are chatterboxes, and they love to pick up chunks of language they hear you using naturally.

'Wow. That's a lovely (picture). Well done!'

'Phew! That was hard work, wasn't it? I'm a bit tired now. Aren't you? Who's tired?'

'Nobody? Really? I can't believe it!'

'We've got another (5 minutes) now. Tell me what you would like to do – would you like to sing a song, listen to the story once more, or would you like to...?'

'Wow! The lesson's almost over. Let's quickly recap what we learnt today. Who learnt a new word? (James), how about you? Which word did you learn today? Fantastic! What other words did we learn? OK, and what else was new today?'

And here are a few techniques and ideas you may find useful.

1. Philip Kerr (2014, p. 21) suggests a technique that he calls *sandwiching* to help students with language they may find difficult to understand. While giving instructions, insert bits of translation in the students' own language, like this:

T: 'We're going to play a game now. *Wir spielen ein Spiel*. It's called Snake in the Grass. Who wants to be the snake? *Wer will die Schlange sein?* Petra? OK, come here. Snake, lie down. OK, good. Now, when I say "Snake in the grass!" you all run away from the snake as quickly as you can. *Wenn ich Snake in the grass sage, läuft ihr alle so schnell ihr könnt von der Schlange weg*. OK, and then the snake [...]'

2. Here is a technique I learnt from Günter Gerngross, my co-author on various primary course books.

Make a cardboard sign to stick on the classroom wall that says *Our record for speaking English is minutes*. If you laminate the sign, you can write the number of minutes on the sign with a felt pen, then easily change it as the students' English talk-time increases.

3. I have very successfully used another sign: ENGLISH SPOKEN. At the beginning of each lesson, I ask a student to hang it outside the classroom door, as a sign to the *world outside* that whoever enters the class must speak English. Meanwhile, I'll have pre-arranged for somebody who is neither a teacher of English – nor indeed an English speaker – to come into the class at some point and announce something (like the caretaker in the anecdote above – although that wasn't staged, as far as I know!). You can be sure that your students will enjoy the situation enormously when somebody they know who normally speaks their own language has to try to express themselves in English!
4. This is an activity that you may occasionally want to do with your students, as a wrapup activity after teaching them a new functional language area, e.g. *shopping*.

Play *Let's pretend!* with your students and get them to mediate for somebody (that is, you) who doesn't speak English.

T: 'OK, *Und nun stellt euch vor, wir sind in einem Land wo English gesprochen wird. Stellt euch vor, ich könnte kein Englisch. Das ist ein Geschäft, und ihr drei seid Verkäufer. Wer kann fragen, ob es hier Bananen gibt?*' (Translation: OK, Now let's pretend we are in a country where people speak English. Let's pretend I don't speak English. This is a shop, and you three are the shopkeepers. Who can ask if they've got some bananas?)



S1: 'You have bananas?'

S2: 'Yes. Look here.'

T: '*Kannst du fragen, wieviel sie kosten?*'

S3: 'How much is it? ... are they?'

S2: 'The bananas? Ah, £1 for one banana.'

T: '*Sag bitte, dass ich gern drei Bananen hätte.*'

S4: 'She like three bananas.'

T: (whispering to S4, to help) 'She'd like three bananas, please.'

S4: 'She'd like three bananas, please.'

S2: 'OK. Here you are.'

I hope you find these ideas useful – and now I'm very much looking forward to hearing your ideas on the use of the students' own language. Join our discussion on the forum!

Further reading:

Cameron, L (2001) *Teaching Languages to Young Learners*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kerr, P (2014) *Translation and Own-language Activities*. Series editor: Scott Thornbury. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Meyer, H (2008) *The Pedagogical Implication of L1 Use on the L2 Classroom*.

Retrieved 10 August 2014 from: kyoai.ac.jp/college/ronshuu/no-08/meyer1.pdf