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## Keeping Students Speaking English in Class

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### Introduction

In foreign language classes where the aim is to develop speaking skills, keeping students speaking the target language instead of the native language is a problem many teachers face. Opinions vary widely on what teachers should do about it as well as the effectiveness and consequences of different approaches. Consider the following two examples from Zemach (2006): "Our behavior [speaking the native language] made the teacher furious. She reported us to the director as 'bad students' because we would not speak only [the foreign language]. We both dropped the class . . ." and "The method for enforcing [speaking the target language only] was to give each student ten large safety pins, called boo-boo pins, which they kept with them at all times . . . It was an amazing technique" (17). The aim of the present paper is to use a simple problem solving approach to explore several facets of this issue and to offer suggestions on how teachers may respond to excessive use of the native language in their classes. Specifically, it addresses the following questions: What behavior are we talking about? Why is this a problem? How serious is this problem? Why are the students using the native language? How should the teacher deal with the problem? The discussion below is written from the perspective of an English-as-a-foreign language teacher in Japan.

### What Behavior Are We Taking About?

When working with a partner or in small groups, the teacher observes the students speaking Japanese with each other. We can guide our description of what is going on by asking a series of ques-

tions such as the following:

1. How many students are involved? How many groups or pairs are involved? Is it a few individuals or the whole class?
2. How much Japanese is being spoken? A few words? A few sentences? A sustained conversation?
3. What are they talking about? Are they trying to clarify the teacher's instructions? Are they helping each other understand the lesson or task? Are they chatting about out-of-class personal business?
4. Do the students respond to the teacher's encouragement (or order) to not speak Japanese and to use English instead? Is there compliance, defiance, or withdrawal behavior (silence) in response to the teacher's instructions?

### **Why Is This a Problem?**

Using some Japanese in class may not necessarily be a problem. In fact, in some cases it may be beneficial, for example, helping to clarify instructions or meaning. It can become a problem, however, when students are using more Japanese than English, or when they engage in non-class-related conversations that distract them from learning English and interfere with the other students. In either case, the problem becomes increasingly serious when it is widespread and occurs frequently.

### **Why Are the Students Using Japanese? How Can the Teacher Deal with the Problem?**

Some possible reasons why students use Japanese are listed below. We can broadly classify them as primarily teacher-based, student-based, materials-based, or task-based. These factors, however, can interact with each other to create more complex situations. For each reason, I have provided suggestions for encouraging more English use based on my experience.

**Table 1. Reasons for Speaking Japanese and How to Encourage More English Use**

| Reasons for Speaking Japanese   | How to Encourage More English Use  |
|---|--|
| 1. Students are trying to clarify what the teacher said.  | Don't speak too fast. Give clearer instructions.   |
| 2. Students are trying to understand the contents (vocabulary, grammar, etc.) of the instructional materials (textbooks, etc.). | The material is too difficult. Adapt the material and provide more explanation.  |
| 3. Because of previous experience, students think it is acceptable to speak Japanese.   | Course expectations are not clearly established or enforced. Make the policy clear from the beginning. Be consistent.  |
| 4. Students lack the ability (vocabulary, grammar) to say the particular thing they want to say in English.                     | Provide model answers. Teach conversational strategies. Encourage dictionary use if needed, preferably an English-English dictionary.  |
| 5. The task is beyond the students' ability level or not well designed (so they give up and talk in Japanese to fill the time). | Re-design or skip this task (see Nunan).   |
| 6. Students are talking about personal matters that are more interesting or important to them.                                  | The task or content of the lesson is not interesting or meaningful. Consider using alternative materials. In addition, engage students in conversations on topics interesting and important to them, and try to relate the contents to the course objectives (e.g., Brown, Nunan). |

|  |   |
|--|---|
| 7. Students lack confidence or are afraid of making mistakes in front of others.   | The task or topic is anxiety provoking or too difficult. Use easier tasks and other topics. Provide hints and other encouragement.  |
| 8. Some students are speaking Japanese, and other students feel they have to go along.   | Remind them of the class policy and the consequences of using or not using English. For example, "Students who want to get an A or B speak a lot of English and don't speak Japanese. Students who don't speak much English or speak too much Japanese will get a C, D, or F."                                      |
| 9. Something outside of class is on their mind, and they are having trouble focusing on using English today.                       | There may be family or personal problems. Be sensitive and flexible.  |
| 10. The topic is so interesting that the students become passionately engaged talking about it and switch naturally into Japanese. | Remind students that this is an English class. Provide vocabulary and structures needed to discuss the topic.   |
| 11. Students are not really interested in speaking English. They lack internal or external motivation.                             | Be sure the students clearly understand the minimum requirements for passing the course. Be friendly and encouraging, respecting the student as a human being regardless of his/her attitude toward English or school, while at the same time making it clear that inappropriate use of Japanese is not acceptable. |

# More Ideas for Encouraging English Use

Below are several methods that have been used to encourage students to speak more English and less Japanese in class. I have used the first three in many different teaching situations in Japan. Considering the diversity of the situations I have used them in (e.g., mixed ability levels, large and small class sizes, strong and weak levels of motivation), they have generally worked well. I have not used the Boo-Boo Pin method, but according to Zemach (17), it has been used successfully with Japanese students with low levels of English.

**Self-Evaluation Checklist:** Students have their own checklist. At the end of each discussion activity (or class) they rate themselves on their participation, including how much English or Japanese they spoke. The teacher gives regular feedback on how realistic their judgment is. An example appears Appendix A.

**Group Secretary:** One member of each discussion group keeps a record (checklist) of who speaks in the group, how many times they speak, and whether they are speaking English or Japanese. I have used this method with upper-level groups. It is more objective than self-evaluation, but the secretary does not get to speak much.

**The "Minus 1, Plus 1" Method:** Each time a student uses Japanese, the teacher says, "Minus 1" and keeps a record of the total number of minus points. The number of minus points affects the student's grade. The student can reclaim his/her minus points by speaking English ("Plus 1"). I have seen this technique work well with some students. Keep it light hearted and do it with a smile. Be a teacher not a police officer.

**Boo-Boo Pin Method.** Zemach describes how this method was used with company employees in an intensive language study program in Japan:

[The students] were supposed to stay entirely in English for the whole two weeks, including break times, meal times, and rest times. The method for enforcing this was to give each student ten large safety pins, called boo-boo pins, which the kept with

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them at all times. If a student spoke Japanese, a trainer or any other student could take the offender's pin and add it to his or her own collection. (17)

### Conclusion

A frequently asked question is whether there should be a program-wide target language-only policy. I think that at the university level circumstances can vary widely from department to department and course to course as well as from class to class. There are many reasons why learners resort to using their native language, and the reasons are not necessarily bad. Therefore, a program-wide policy could be difficult to implement successfully or enforce fairly. Perhaps faculty development activities and formal or informal sharing of information, experience, and opinions are better ways to approach this issue (e.g., Cranton, Johnson, and Sprick). Considering the diversity of learning and teaching styles that can be observed in foreign-language classrooms, it is necessary to consider "whether your policy is working for both you and your students or whether you'd like to either loosen or tighten the reins" (Zemach 17).

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### Appendix A: Discussion Participation Score Sheet <sup>1)</sup>

Use this score sheet to help improve your ability to participate actively and effectively. Key: 4 = Very good, 3 = Good, 2 = Fair (so-so), 1 = Poor, 0 = Did not participate

|       | Date | Topic | Speaking English | Voice quality | Body language | Contents | Interaction | Total |
|-------|------|-------|------------------|---------------|---------------|----------|-------------|-------|
| 1     |      |       |                  |               |               |          |             |       |
| 2     |      |       |                  |               |               |          |             |       |
| 3     |      |       |                  |               |               |          |             |       |
| 4     |      |       |                  |               |               |          |             |       |
| 5     |      |       |                  |               |               |          |             |       |
| 6     |      |       |                  |               |               |          |             |       |
| 7     |      |       |                  |               |               |          |             |       |
| 8     |      |       |                  |               |               |          |             |       |
| Total |      |       |                  |               |               |          |             |       |

**Notes:** (1) **Speaking English:** I used English as much as possible and encouraged others to speak English, too. (2) **Voice:** I spoke clearly with good pronunciation, good rhythm, and good intonation. (3) **Body language:** I had good posture and good eye contact. I used appropriate gestures and appropriate facial expressions. (4) **Contents:**

1) The layout and contents have been modified slightly to fit space limitations.



I gave details, examples, reasons, and opinions. I express my feelings appropriately and related personal experiences. (5) **Interaction:** I interacted with others using expression such as these: "I see." "Oh, really?" "How about you?" "That's interesting." "I have a question." "Could you repeat that, please?" "Pardon me?" "Me, too!" "I agree." "Pardon me?" "Me, too!" "I agree."