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Staying in the Target Language While Teaching Middle School and High School

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Abstract

This article advocates the use of the target language at all times in the classroom at all levels of language instruction. While addressed specifically to middle school and high school teachers, the article suggests an approach to language instruction that can be implemented for students of all ages. After recounting how the author's experience teaching high school students convinced him to teach exclusively in Spanish, the article then addresses possible objections to the instructional method, presents topics to cover when teaching Day 1 of Level 1 of a language, and discusses ways to help students thrive in an all-target-language classroom.

Introduction

Levine begins his 2003 article examining student and instructor attitudes toward the use of the target language in the classroom in the following way:

> There are likely few foreign language (FL) instructors who have not developed an individualized approach to classroom target language (TL) and first language (L1) use. This approach can be influenced by pedagogical training, knowledge of the second language acquisition (SLA) literature, official policy, and classroom experience, yet often it appears to be based primarily on classroom experience and intuitions about what feels right (p. 343).

Indeed, there is no consensus among SLA experts and FL teachers concerning how much teaching should be done in the TL and how much L1 is appropriate to include during instruction. Clearly, we have moved well beyond the days when FLs were routinely taught in English using the grammar-translation method. Just about every FL teacher would agree with regard to instruction in the TL that "more is better." Yet exactly how much TL should be used in the classroom remains a subject of debate.[1] In its *Position Statement on Use of the Target Language in the Classroom*, ACTFL states:

> The pivotal role of target-language interaction in language learning is emphasized in the K-16 *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century*. ACTFL therefore recommends that language educators and their students use the target language as exclusively as possible (90% plus) at all levels of instruction during instructional time and, when feasible, beyond the classroom (p. 1).

Though it provides some useful guidance, ACTFL's recommendation that teachers and students "use the target language as exclusively as possible" is most certainly interpreted in different ways by different FL teachers. For some, 90% TL use serves as a sort of standard to aspire to, even though it may seem to be an unreachable goal. Other teachers undoubtedly focus on the "plus" of the recommended "90 plus" TL use, and consequently choose to teach their classes entirely or almost entirely in the TL. In the pages that follow I will discuss how my own approach to TL use in the classroom evolved over time and offer some thoughts on ways to teach entirely in the TL at any level of instruction.

How Much Target Language Should I Use?

I began teaching high school Spanish in the early nineties and, like many middle school and high school language teachers, used both English and the TL (Spanish, in my case) when teaching. My first year I taught Spanish One using half Spanish and half English; in my Spanish Three class I spoke roughly 70% Spanish and 30% English. My second year teaching I decided that I would use even more Spanish, and consequently taught Spanish One using 60% Spanish and 40% English, and Spanish Three using 80% Spanish and 20% English. My basic approach for those two years was to begin each class in Spanish, do much of the instruction in Spanish, and resort to English at certain specific times such as when students did not seem to be understanding the lesson, when I needed to explain a difficult grammar point, or when I was discussing logistics related to upcoming assignments or our class schedule. At the time I was pleased to be speaking primarily Spanish in the classroom and became convinced that I had reached the upper limit of what my students could handle in terms of hearing input in the TL. My intuition told me that stretching to use even more Spanish in the classroom would be counterproductive and result only in frustrated students and less language learning.

My method of instruction changed radically the following year as the result of a chance encounter with an experienced Spanish teacher I met at a summer workshop for FL teachers. While having lunch together, this teacher and I discussed our schools and our approaches to teaching Spanish. I explained that I used more Spanish than English in my teaching and that I was teaching both first and third year Spanish classes. She explained to me that she taught only Spanish One, and when I asked about how much Spanish she used in the classroom, she answered: "I teach Spanish in Spanish."

"Of course," I replied, "I speak Spanish a lot as well. But what percent Spanish would you say you speak in class?"

"One hundred percent."

"In Spanish One?"

"In Spanish One."

"Even the first day?"

"Even the first day."

"You never speak English?"

"I never speak English," she confirmed.

My first reaction was amazement. I was impressed that it could be done and curious about how she managed instruction, discipline, etc. while speaking only

Spanish. But this lasted only for a moment. The next moment my thought was (and I believe this is a thought shared by many FL teachers) "OK, you speak only Spanish to your students. But if you had *my* students, you wouldn't be able to do it." She could teach using only Spanish, I decided, because her students must be better than my students. I figured that she probably taught little children, because you can do anything with little children and they just go with it. Or maybe she was a college professor, because mature, serious college students could handle an all-TL environment. Finally I imagined that the only other possibility was that she worked at a prep school populated by motivated and high-achieving students.

In order to confirm my suspicions – and convinced that her answer would make clear the superiority of her students over mine – I then asked her what kind of school she taught at and what her students were like. Her response, quite simply, was "I teach at a middle school." I was not prepared for this answer. In fact, of all the possible answers she might have given, I considered this one the least likely of all. It made no sense to me. "Do you teach at a middle school for superheroes?" I asked. "Do you teach at a gifted and talented middle school?"

"No. It's just a regular public middle school with average students."

"Wow," was all I could manage to say. She taught Spanish One entirely in Spanish to middle school students. I believed her, but still could not fathom successfully teaching entirely in the TL with students in sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. "How do you do it?" I asked. "Let's say it's the first day of class and you say to your students 'Open your books to page five and do the first exercise at the top of the page. Work with a partner.' How do you get your students to do that if they don't understand any Spanish?"

In response to my question she quickly stood up and grabbed the textbook that was next to her. "*Abran el libro ahora* [Open your books now]," she said, as if she were teaching the class at that very moment. While saying these words she showed me the book and opened it. "*Vamos a la página cinco* [We are going to page five]," she continued. As she said this she held out her fingers and counted saying "*Uno, dos, tres, cuatro, cinco* [One, two, three, four, five]." Then she opened the book to page five, showed me the number five on the page, and pointed to Exercise One saying, "*Vamos a hacer este ejercicio, el primero* [We are going to do this exercise, the first one]. *Vamos a trabajar con un compañero, un amigo* [We are going to work with a partner, a friend]." As she said these last words she pointed to imaginary groups of two students, and gestured to show that they would be working together. She also appeared to be drawing something on an imaginary blackboard to help reinforce what she was saying. All of these words and actions were presented enthusiastically, making me think that the students in her class most likely enjoyed having her as their teacher.

As she finished this brief teaching demonstration, I realized that my relationship with the TL had just been changed forever. My focus when thinking about my own teaching had been almost entirely on the language of instruction; my conclusion had been that since first year students would not understand the Spanish that I spoke, there would be very little successful communication in the classroom. This experienced teacher, however, had convinced me that there was much more to communication in the classroom than simply the words being spoken. With her imaginary mini-lesson presented over lunch, she had shown me that the TL is only one of the many tools we can use to communicate with students. We FL teachers can also use, in

fact, should also be using, our tone of voice, body, gestures, the blackboard, in short, anything at all that will help students to understand what we are trying to communicate. In just a minute and with only this demonstration of how she teaches on the first day, this teacher convinced me that her method of teaching was superior to mine.

In the eighteen years since that lunch meeting (during which I taught three more years of high school Spanish and now fifteen years of all levels of college Spanish) I have taught entirely in Spanish in all of my classes. Is English allowed, ever, in my classroom? Yes, it is. There is English in the textbook I use, at times in handouts I distribute, and occasionally on the board (where I do sometimes write words in English). I do not, however, ever speak English in class; I teach Spanish in Spanish. As I conclude these introductory remarks I want to make sure that the point of this article is clear. I am not advocating here that FL teachers in middle school and high school speak *more* in the TL when teaching. I am advocating that FL teachers speak *exclusively* in the TL in the classroom.

Possible Objections

There are a number of possible objections to the method of teaching entirely in the TL; in fact, some of them I had myself before my own conversion experience. I would like to briefly address four of the most common objections:

Objection #1: My students won't like it

My first response to this objection is to agree: it's true, some students, in fact, many students won't like it, especially at first. But I don't care. I don't believe that Algebra teachers shy away from teaching Algebra because some students don't like it. More than that, I am convinced first that teaching in the TL is the best way for students to learn, and second that many students do, in fact, enjoy classes taught only in the TL. I have never had – and surely never will have – a high school student explain to classmates in front of the class that he or she actually likes that I speak only Spanish in class. I did, however, occasionally hear this opinion from students in one-on-one conversations before or after school.[2]

Students adapt to the classroom experience presented to them by the teacher. In fact, we FL teachers have a unique opportunity when we teach first year FL students. Though children know from very early grades what happens in an English class or in a Math class, they are typically introduced to language study in this country only in middle school or high school. So when we choose to teach first year FL classes entirely in the TL, students are apt to conclude that languages are simply taught that way. In my own experience, for example, third year Spanish students found it somewhat difficult to deal with my use of only Spanish after they had become accustomed to two years of English instruction as part of their language classes. First year students, on the other hand, almost always accepted my teaching style without questioning it at all. I do not mean by this that they always understood everything I said in Spanish, because they certainly did not. Rather, my first year students simply considered my all-TL instruction as just another unchangeable aspect of their classroom environment, something to be dealt with rather than changed. Our room had desks that couldn't be moved, and was taught by Señor Worden, the FL teacher who always spoke Spanish in class. Students understood that our class just worked that way.[3]

Objection #2: My students can't do it

This is what held me back during my first two years of teaching. I knew that with some students the all-TL instruction method could work, but was sure that my own students couldn't handle it. In an article focusing on student and teacher perceptions and beliefs about FL instruction, Gregory Thompson writes: "If teachers believe that languages are learned a certain way, their behavior will reflect that way of thinking in spite of possible research and training to the contrary" (p. 537). I know that this was true in my own case. During my first two years of teaching I was convinced that English needed to be a part of my FL instruction. When I switched to using only Spanish during my third year of teaching, however, I found that my students thrived in this new instructional environment. I wish there had been a linguist in my high school classroom conducting a study on student learning both my Year 2 of teaching (when I spoke both English and Spanish) and Years 3, 4, and 5 (when I spoke only Spanish). Though there was no official analysis done on my students, I know that once I started teaching only in Spanish I had fewer discipline problems, more student interest in the language, and better student reading, writing, speaking, and understanding of Spanish. And all of this occurred in the same school with the same students I had been teaching in my combination of English and Spanish; the only change had been in my own method of instruction.

Objection #3: The method won't work; there will be too much my students won't understand

There is most definitely a degree of faith that one must have in order to teach entirely in the TL, a faith that the approach is valid and that, even though there will be many moments when students are confused, maintaining an all TL learning environment is an important and worthwhile goal while teaching. Without that faith, a teacher is faced with the constant temptation to switch to English. I think that to make the all TL instructional approach work one must both acknowledge that students will often be unsure of what is being communicated and believe that this lack of comprehension is an acceptable result of the instructional method.

When I began teaching entirely in Spanish I noticed that some classes seemed to go really well, others just okay, and others not too well at all. This was, in fact, no change from how my classes had gone when I taught using both English and Spanish. Surely this happens to all teachers of all subjects; we know that not every class will be perfect and that not everything we say will be clearly understood by our students. Yet somehow FL teachers— like me in my first two years— have this utopian idea that switching to English will result in perfect comprehension by students. If only I teach in English, the thought process goes, I can more quickly, easily, and clearly communicate what I am teaching so that the students will understand it perfectly. But this line of thinking ignores several important points. One is that even speaking English does not guarantee that students will learn what we are trying to teach. Another is that I have become convinced that switching to English can communicate to students one or more of the following ideas: 1) As the teacher I don't believe you are smart enough to understand my use of the TL; 2) English is needed for important communication, like grammar explanation, while the TL is good just for fun things like colors, numbers, and songs. Clearly these are not messages we want to convey to our stu-

dents. Moreover, I now think that much of my teaching for the first two years, when I switched back and forth between Spanish and English, was perceived by students in the following way: "Blah, blah, blah, blah…" (which is what students processed as I taught in Spanish), followed by their paying attention when I announced: "So what I just said is that the verb 'ser' is used to express…." I believe I was training my students to wait out my Spanish and simply start tuning into me when I finally switched to English. Once I taught only in the TL, this no longer became an option for students.

My attitude toward student comprehension of the Spanish I use in class also changed when I made the switch to teaching entirely in Spanish. I remember during my first two years of teaching thinking at times: "These poor students. There is no way they can understand all of the Spanish I am using. They must be frustrated." I no longer think about student comprehension in those terms. Now I am more likely to think: "Clearly they won't understand everything I am saying in Spanish, but that's okay. They will figure some of it out now, and some of it out in the future. It's fine that they do not have 100% comprehension." Part of my reason for this change in attitude has come from simply spending a lot of time with high school students. I remember, for instance, on several occasions talking to certain students before or after school about their interest in videogames. On a number of occasions I would ask students: "How do you even know what you're doing in the game? Do you read an instructional manual before playing?" The students would simply laugh at my questions and respond: "We don't know what we're doing at first, but we just figure it out." I have faith in the ability of middle school and high school students to figure things out, and one of my goals as a FL teacher is to teach entirely in the TL in an effort to help my students figure out Spanish.

In my current position as the Spanish Program Director at the University of Alabama, I am responsible for the training of Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) who teach both Introductory and Intermediate Spanish classes. To help these students in their own teaching I emphasize two points:

1. GTAs must use the text and the syllabus we provide for them, likewise they are to follow the guideline that the only language of instruction we use in our program is Spanish.
2. The same building where we teach most of our Spanish classes houses the English Language Institute (ELI), which teaches English to hundreds of foreign students each year. A typical English Language Instruction (ELI) class might have a student from South Korea, another from Germany, another from Peru, several from Saudi Arabia, etc. The very capable ELI instructors who teach these students spend no time at all wondering what their language of instruction should be. They teach English in English. I tell our Spanish GTAs that like these ELI instructors, their job is to teach Spanish in Spanish.

Objection #4: My level of speaking in the target language is not high enough for me to do it

This is the objection that I best understand, because when I began using only Spanish in the high school classroom my level of Spanish was good, but not great. I was a high school teacher with reasonable Spanish, but there were still many things I wasn't entirely comfortable expressing. I could communicate fairly well with my

students, but not consistently at a very high level. What I learned when I switched entirely to teaching in the TL is that the change helped me to improve my Spanish. The act of speaking Spanish all the time for five class periods a day had a positive impact on my speaking ability.

The kinds of reasons that I found for not speaking in the TL at all times during class are shared by many other FL teachers as well. In an article titled "Student Teachers' Attitudes and Beliefs About Using the Target Language in the Classroom," Bateman (2008) notes of the student teachers she studied:

> Although a number of factors were mentioned [as inhibiting the ability to teach in the TL], six were particularly salient in participants' questionnaires and written reflections, indicating concerns about (1) classroom management, (2) lack of time, (3) linguistic limitations of nonnative teachers, (4) teacher fatigue, (5) building rapport with students, and (6) avoiding unfamiliar vocabulary (p. 18).

As a first- and second-year FL teacher, I also worried about these kinds of issues, deciding, for example, that using English would help me go more quickly through the material or that it would help lower discipline problems in class. Only when I switched entirely to Spanish did I realize that I could teach even more effectively entirely in the TL. As for my way of handling classroom management issues, when I saw a student misbehaving during class I would approach and say "*Háblame después de la clase* [Speak to me after class]." Then, when class was over, I would address the discipline issue with the student.

An Approach to Teaching Day 1 of Level 1

I used to begin teaching Spanish One on the first day saying something like: "*Buenos días estudiantes. Yo soy el maestro de esta clase y durante este año vais a aprender mucho español* [Good morning students. I am the teacher of this class and during this year you are going to learn a lot of Spanish]." Then I would switch to English saying something like: "Don't worry if you don't understand everything I'm saying. Little by little your comprehension of Spanish will improve as time passes. I'm Señor Worden and I'm happy to be teaching you Spanish this year. Now let's talk about the policies and guidelines for this course…"

When I switched to teaching only in Spanish, I radically changed my approach to the first day of class as well. My goal was to start class in a way that would show students that they could make sense of what I was saying even though I was speaking entirely in Spanish. I did not expect 100% comprehension, but I did want to demonstrate to students that they could understand important aspects of what was being communicated to them in the TL. As students came into class I would be waiting outside the door of my classroom (I wanted students to have the full effect of my speaking only Spanish, so didn't want to be in the classroom speaking English before class). As the bell rang I would walk into my new Spanish One class and begin speaking. I would say, entirely in Spanish: "Welcome to our Spanish Four class. I am Mr. Worden and I am happy to be here with you. Since this is a Spanish Four class (and at this moment I would write *Español 4* on the board and hold up my hand with four fingers), I know that you understand what I am saying. This class will be a great opportunity for you to perfect your Spanish listening, reading, writing, and speak-

ing skills. You will also learn a lot about the many interesting cultures found in the Spanish-speaking world." I would say this whole introduction to the class purposely at a rather fast pace; then I would stop speaking and smile at the students.

By this point students would be looking around at each other and reaching into their backpacks for their schedules in an attempt to figure out how they had ended up in the wrong class. Some brave student would raise his or her hand and say "I thought this was Spanish One." I would pretend not to understand, so some other student would say "Uno, uno…" and another would maybe hold up one finger. I would repeat "uno" to let students know that I understood this, but continue to seem confused by all this and insist, in Spanish, that this was most certainly a Spanish Four class. After some more back and forth with students – and in doing this over the years I have found that some students find this all quite humorous while others seem panic-stricken – I would eventually pretend to look at my own schedule and say, of course in Spanish: "Spanish One? Not Spanish Four? Oh, this is a Spanish One class?" Even the first day of class some students would respond to this and say "yes" or "sí" or simply repeat "uno." Hearing this, I would shrug my shoulders and hold out my hands in an apologetic fashion. I would then go to the board, erase *Español 4*, and replace it with *Español 1*. Next I would look back at the students and say: "*Lo siento mucho. Ha sido mi error. Sí, sí, mi error. Ésta sí es una clase del primer año de español* [I'm sorry. It has been my mistake. Yes, yes, my mistake. This is a first year Spanish class]." At this point students would relax a bit and start putting their schedules away. I could see that they were relieved that the confusion had been cleared up and that they were indeed in the proper class.

My next step was to pause. I just paused and looked at the students. They looked at me. I looked at them. Nothing happened. No one spoke. And then, after ten, maybe twenty seconds, I began speaking in Spanish (yet again at a purposely rapid pace), saying: "Welcome to our Spanish One class. I am Mr. Worden and I am happy to be here with you. Since this is a Spanish One class (and at this moment I would point to the *Español 1* on the board and hold up my hand with one finger), I know that you understand only a little of what I am saying. This class will be a great opportunity for you to develop your Spanish listening, reading, writing, and speaking skills. You will also learn a lot about the many interesting cultures found in the Spanish-speaking world."

What was I trying to accomplish with this odd introduction to the class? A number of different things. Most importantly I wanted students to realize that they could make sense of what I was communicating even though I spoke entirely in the TL. Of course, I was working with more than Spanish. I used the board, my hand to show numbers, gestures (such as my apologetic shrug), and cognates (such as *clase* and *error*). I also pretended not to understand when a student said "I thought this was Spanish One," and responded only when I heard "uno." Even though I speak entirely in Spanish and only respond to Spanish, in every class I have ever taught students have grasped the initial situation (that somehow it seems that they are in the wrong class), worked with me to resolve the problem, and understood in the end that the initial confusion was the result of my mistake, not their mistake. The pause, once it's all figured out, is purposeful on my part. I believe that during the pause students might be thinking: "OK, so he just figured out that he's in a Spanish One class and he

knows we don't understand him. Now for sure he's going to speak to us in English." This is the point, of course, after the long pause, when I simply continue in Spanish speaking at the same rapid pace I used when it seemed that I thought we were in a Spanish Four class. I want students to get the message that as the teacher I know we are in a first year class, I know they will not understand much of what I say, and despite all of that I will be teaching in Spanish all the time. As the class continues I do slow down the pace of my Spanish just a bit, and repeat myself when necessary, but the single most important purpose of this whole introduction is to show students that in this class we can and will successfully communicate in the TL.

I dedicate the rest of the first day of class to an aspect of FL study that allows first year students to learn something that clearly shows them that they are already making progress in the TL: pronunciation. Since pronunciation is first and foremost about sounds, I teach it with the book closed. I want students to focus on the sounds they are hearing and making rather than on how this new language uses letters to represent those sounds. I don't even start with words, just noises. I will grunt, for instance, and say *Repitan* [Repeat]. I will whistle, or screech, or make other odd sounds and ask the students to repeat the sounds. Then I ask students to repeat other sounds they hear. I will clap my hands and ask students to reproduce the sound. I will stomp my foot or drop a book and ask students to make the sound they hear, praising a student who reproduces it well. I will also take a sheet of paper, wave it in the air, and ask students to reproduce the sound. Inevitably, some student will take out a sheet of paper and wave it in order to match the sound, but I say, while pointing to my mouth: "*No, no. Tienes que usar la boca* [No, no. You have to use your mouth]." When a student successfully manages to pronounce the sound of waving paper, I congratulate him or her, saying: "*Muy bien. Impresionante. Tú hablas papel* [Very good. Impressive. You speak the language of paper]." We do eventually move on to sounds that exist in Spanish, but the whole first day is taught with the book closed.

Considerations Outside of the Classroom

The year I switched to teaching entirely in the TL, I realized that I would need to reach beyond my students to other constituencies in order for my teaching method to succeed. This may not be necessary at other schools, but in my high school I was the only teacher who taught entirely in the TL and I didn't want this to cause problems that could be avoided. One of my first steps was to talk to the guidance counselors. My message to them was the following: "I will be teaching entirely in Spanish this year, and some students could be so intimidated that they might want to drop my class. Please encourage them to stay in my class, convey to them that I am aware that they don't understand everything they say, and ask them to give the class at least another two weeks." What happened that first year of teaching entirely in the TL? As expected, about five juniors from each of my Spanish Three classes talked to their guidance counselors saying that they needed to get out of my class because they couldn't understand what I was saying. After encouragement from these guidance counselors, the students decided to stick it out a while longer. In the end, none of these students dropped the class. Not a single Spanish One student went to a guidance counselor seeking to get out of my class. Some of this is undoubtedly because freshmen know less than juniors do about things like making appointments with

guidance counselors and dropping classes. Still, I believe that at least part of the reason that the Spanish One students showed less anxiety when immersed in the TL is because as new FL students they simply accepted that Spanish was taught in Spanish.

I also talked to the school's principal, an active and involved man who would often walk around the school looking in classrooms to see what was happening in class. My message to him was: "I will be teaching entirely in Spanish this year, and I will be doing more communicative activities as part of my teaching than in the past. This means that when you look in my classroom it might seem chaotic. You might see students paired off doing an oral activity from the book. Students might be in bigger groups, talking, writing, and working together. At times you will see students walking around the classroom interviewing each other. You most certainly will hear students saying '*No entiendo* [I don't understand]' and '*Repita, por favor* [Please repeat].' I hope you can accept that this focus on teaching and learning in the TL is all part of how I think Spanish should be taught." Fortunately for me, the principal supported this approach to FL instruction.

One final group I communicated with was the parents, who at times expressed anxiety regarding instruction done entirely in the TL. What certain parents said to me about their children was: "I'm concerned that Johnny doesn't understand your Spanish in class." Though undoubtedly that was true, part of the implicit message at times was actually: "I'm concerned that Johnny is not going to get a good grade in your class." This is understandable. When teaching high school I took a number of steps to help address these concerns. My syllabus was always in English and every assignment was written on the board or in a handout in English. This was done partly so that no student could say "I didn't understand what Señor Worden said when he assigned the homework, so I didn't do it." I also always gave a vocabulary quiz on the third day of class. This might seem a bit early to give a quiz, but I found it quite helpful in my teaching. I even had parents tell me on Parent-Teacher night: "Sally was really nervous at the start of your class because you spoke only Spanish, but when she was doing well on the quizzes and tests, she realized she wasn't totally lost." As the FL teacher I know that students will not understand everything I say, but it's harder for the students themselves to know how they are doing in class. Frequent tests, quizzes, and other graded assignments, starting very early in the semester, help students evaluate their progress.

The best forum I found for communicating with parents was the night early in the fall semester when they walk through their child's schedule and meet all the teachers. At my school the parents would spend about five minutes in each class and maybe introduce themselves to the teacher on the way into or out of the classroom. For each class I would spend the first two minutes or so of my time speaking Spanish. I would say: "I am Mr. Worden and I am the teacher of this Spanish One class. I want you to know that during class I speak only Spanish, which I know can be difficult for first year students. I don't expect your children to understand everything I say, but I think it's important that students get a lot of input in the TL so…" I was fully aware that most parents understood little or none of my Spanish, but I thought it was important to give them an idea of what their child's class was like and how I taught it. After speaking these first few minutes in Spanish, I would switch to English and say: "Since you are not my students, I will speak some English with you. But I want you to

know that during class with your children I speak only Spanish. I do not expect your children to understand everything I say, but think it important to…"

The first time I did this I was concerned about what parents might say to me as they left my classroom. I thought they might complain that my Spanish-only instructional method might be too difficult or frustrating for their children. What I learned through the years, however, was quite the opposite. Often after one of these sessions a parent leaving the classroom would say some variation of: "Mr. Worden, I'm Mrs. Smith, Mary's mother. When I studied Spanish back in high school it was taught in English, and I can't speak any Spanish at all. I'm happy that you're trying something different with my daughter." Not every parent, of course, praises my instructional method. But on these nights I heard overwhelmingly positive feedback from parents regarding my teaching entirely in Spanish. Most commonly they had themselves been high school FL students in classes taught primarily in English, were aware that instruction in English had not helped them develop communicative competence, and were open to a new approach of FL teaching. When the parents were accompanied by their child, I would try to say something in Spanish to my student as he or she entered or left the room. It was always amusing to have a short conversation with one of my students, watch the parents look on (often in amazement), and hear the mother or father say while leaving the room: "What did Mr. Worden ask you and what did you say?"

Conclusion

I would like to conclude with some thoughts from Martin Schwartz, a professor of cell biology who in 2008 published a short essay provocatively titled "The importance of stupidity in scientific research." Professor Schwartz's article deals specifically with the challenges faced by doctoral students in the sciences, but I believe that his arguments have real relevance for FL students and FL teachers as well. His essay begins by pointing out that a student pursuing a Ph.D. in the sciences must necessarily undertake a research project that seeks to discover something new, and that consequently the student often feels stupid because he or she daily faces questions to which there are no known answers. Schwartz writes: "What makes it difficult is that research is immersion in the unknown. We just don't know what we're doing" (p. 1771). Likewise in a FL class our students very often – especially at the beginning – just don't know what they are doing. Schwartz's essay encourages science professors not to help their students avoid uncertainty, ambiguity, even stupidity, but rather to accept that not knowing is a necessary part of the process of scientific discovery. He writes of scientific researchers: "The more comfortable we become with being stupid, the deeper we will wade into the unknown and the more likely we are to make big discoveries" (p. 1771). In a similar manner I encourage FL teachers to allow their students to embrace the difficulty, the uncertainty, the complexity of learning a new language. Teaching entirely in the TL does indeed make our students feel stupid at times, but I have become convinced that it is also the best way to help them move beyond the unknown and into a true understanding of the new language.

Endnotes

1 The first few pages of the 2009 article by de la Campa and Nassaji provide an insightful literature review on the topic of TL use in the classroom. The article references experts with a wide range of opinions, from those who see no place for any use of L1 during instruction to those who consider that excluding L1 entirely from the classroom is pedagogically unsound.

2 I think that at times we FL teachers overestimate the degree to which students do not like instruction in the TL. Levine's study found that college students do indeed have some anxiety with regard to TL use in the classroom. Nevertheless, he observes that "the data point to the possibility that instructors may perceive higher levels of TL-use anxiety among students (in general) than students themselves report" (p. 354). I found this to be the case in my own experience with high school students. The year that I began teaching entirely in Spanish did produce some anxiety in my students, especially the first few weeks, but this anxiety was less than I had anticipated.

3 With regard to how TL use impacts student anxiety, Levine notes: "students who reported higher TL use in their FL classes tended to report lower levels of anxiety about TL use. Correspondingly, instructors who reported higher levels of TL use in their classes tended to perceive lower levels of TL-use anxiety in their students. The important implication of this finding is that greater TL use may not translate into greater anxiety for many learners and that many students feel comfortable with more TL use when that is what they are used to" (p. 355). This conclusion supports what I found to be true in my own experience, namely that Spanish Three students (having previous experience with an English and Spanish instructional environment) displayed more anxiety with regard to my exclusive use of Spanish in class than did Spanish One students, who accepted more easily the 100% use of the TL in class.

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