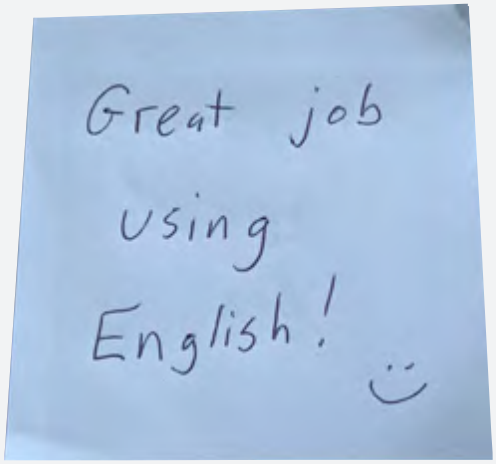
Getting Young Learners to Stick to English

by LAURA LODER BUECHEL



Do you find yourself saying, "Come on, kids, use your English!" more often than you would like to? Do you catch yourself switching into the local language for reasons you can't really justify? The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (2010) encourages teachers and their students to "use the target language as exclusively as possible (90% plus) at all levels of instruction during instructional time and, when feasible, beyond the classroom," and local boards of education around the world, including here in Switzerland, mention something similar in their local curricula. Yet it is easier said than done.

Local-language use in the foreign-language classroom has its place. Macaro (2001) speaks in favor of allowing natural code-switching from the side of the learners, especially younger ones, but explicit use of the mother tongue (as compared to haphazard) from the side of the teachers, which Butzkamm (2003) would consider to be for grammar explanations and for linguistic comparisons.

Regardless of the teacher's reasoning behind the use of the local language, one important role of a teacher is that of encourager or motivator (and, sometimes, cheerleader) to encourage learners to explore and use the target language. The following is a compilation of ideas I have tried out in my own lessons, along with ideas collected from observations in Swiss schools over the years. Before we start, it must be said that some classes don't need any of the tricks listed below; students in those classes are intrinsically motivated to learn. Maybe it's the class dynamic due to or despite the teacher, but they want to learn, and the atmosphere is right. This is unfortunately not always the case, however, and teachers occasionally look for alternative ideas. Providing those ideas is the purpose of this article.

MODELING THE BEHAVIOR YOU WANT YOUR LEARNERS TO USE

Teachers who constantly switch back to the local language are not modeling a behavior they probably would like to see their own learners employ. Paraphrasing, using body language, and simply asking for help when you yourself can't find the language are the same strategic competence skills we should teach our learners, as these examples illustrate:

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- Ask for help: "Oh, my goodness! What does *Chuchichestli* [Swiss German for 'kitchen cabinet'] mean in English? Can anyone help?"
- Use body language: "I don't know the word for this sport (jump around to show the sport of fencing)—does anyone know?"
- Paraphrase: "When we were in the United States, we ate that sweet dessert, kind of like a giant cakey Oreo." (whoopie pie)
- Play nonchalant by throwing in a local-language word in a target-language accent: "One day I was walking up the *treppes* [German for 'steps'], and I fell down!"

I'm often amazed at what children actually know—and in these instances, you are demonstrating to them the skills people use for communicating when they haven't mastered a language or simply have drawn a blank. Like this, the children will model your behavior next time they get stuck.

PRAISING THE USE OF ENGLISH … AND ALLOWING MISTAKES

Everyone reacts well to a bit of positive reinforcement for effort. When a child who doesn't often speak—or who rarely speaks in English—says something in English, I sometimes leave a little sticky note (*Great job! You were caught using English!*), praise the whole class even if it was only one child, or just directly tell the child how pleased I am.

On the same note, those of you who have children perhaps know this type of conversation:

Mommy, can I go outside and play?

Sure! As soon as you've done your homework and cleaned your room and helped with supper!

In my classroom, it can look like this:

Teacher, can I say this in German?

Sure! As soon as you've tried to say it in English!

And once the child has said it in English, he or she gets a positive word and a kind smile.

PRIZE DISTRIBUTION OR REMOVAL

The Swiss do not generally appreciate rewarding learners with food or stickers, but I have observed the following techniques work in classes of eight-year-olds:

- A string is taped to the back of every child's chair. A child who puts in a strong effort to stick to English and not just fall into using German can choose a few beads from the "cool bead jar" (the teacher I observed had pirate-and-skull beads and fairy beads, for example). After a while, the child will have enough beads to use the string for a necklace or some other fun creation.
- During group work, have small bowls or muffin-tin liners in the middle of the group. The teacher can add a few kernels of popcorn, tokens, or stickers as a reward for good behavior. The popcorn then goes into a container for later popping when there's enough; the tokens get added up at the end of the day, and when there's a certain number, the whole class gets to choose a game or song or dance or fun activity in English. If it's a

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competition, the group with the most tokens can choose the reward.

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LOCAL-LANGUAGE TABLE (*STAMMTISCH*) OR STOPLIGHTS

A child or group that feels the need to speak the local language (perhaps the content point is really deep, or maybe the instructions are too complex to work out in English) is allowed to get up and go to the designated *Stammtisch* in a corner of the room. When that's settled, the students go back to their places and continue in English. Similarly, in group work, a group that "needs" to use the local language can put up a "stoplight." In my classroom, I used laminated stoplights, which I had glued onto popsicle sticks. The learners could hold up the popsicle stick/stoplight to let me know that they were aware that they had switched to the local language. By doing so, they are aware of the switch and how long they have switched, and the teacher can monitor or provide necessary support.

TALKING CHIPS OR TOKENS

Each learner gets two game chips, and anyone who uses the local language has to give one up. The learners who finish the lesson and still have two get a kind word. With more-advanced learners, the chips are for conversation roles: red for asking a question, blue for being devil's advocate, and so on. The learners have to use their chips for the task within the time allotted. These roles can be similar to any sort of "reading" roles that can be applied to conversation, too.

ROLES

In basic picture–riddle activities, with learners in groups of four, I often use the following roles:

- the "dicto-freak" (the child who looks up words in the dictionary and says "XXX" means "XXX");
- the writer (the child who takes notes);
- the "trained seal" (the child who says, upon hearing German, "I don't speak German" and makes seal sounds);
- the presenter (the child who describes the picture to the others).

These roles are all tied to a language-related job (not just timekeeper or manager), and sometimes I put stickers on the learners with their jobs written on them so they "live" their jobs.

PROPS

Occasionally, I bring in my hat collection (I have a bag of hats, such as a chicken head, but origami paper hats work just as well). I give one hat to each group (our classes run up to 24 learners, so I need about eight hats). The person speaking can wear the hat, and the children *all* want to speak because they all want to wear the hats. This idea also works with simple props such as sunglasses, scarves, or plastic microphones—learners "become" something or someone when they have a simple character adaptation through a prop. It takes only one small item to become an English-speaking self.

CHANTING TO YOURSELF

I noticed once that when the learners were cutting out memory cards (with a picture on one card and a sentence or description on the other card—I avoid using single words), they

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switched to the local language. So the next time we did this, I said, "Now take your cards back to your seat. As you cut them out, sing to yourself, under your breath, 'I'm cutting out my memory cards' at least 20 times!" I had the language on the board, and I modeled it and did a quick choral drill. Lo and behold, the kids stuck to English and even chatted with their neighbors in English until they were finished.

CLASS EVALUATION CHART

At the end of the lesson, learners rate their amount of English use. If they feel, as a group, that they did a fine job, they get a star. When they get ten stars (or whatever goal is set), then they can choose a fun game to play or story to hear (in English, of course). Similarly, there can be a side for the teacher—if the learners feel that the teacher used English consistently, then the teacher gets a star!

PEOPLE IN THE CLASSROOM: POSTERS, PUPPETS, BAGS, LIFE-SIZE CARDBOARD CUTOUTS

I have a bag with a picture of Greta Thunberg on it. The learners are informed that Greta speaks only Swedish or English. When I hear learners switching to German and no longer trying in English, "Greta" wanders over and sits in front of them and says she wants to be included in the conversation, too. This works really well, and you can always find a picture of an English-speaking person whom the learners react well to and glue it on any paper bag. When I started teaching English, I often had a poster of a famous person (Hannah Montana at the time), and this worked, too, but the bag can be placed in front of the learners as a gentle reminder, and it is closer than a poster. Other teachers I have seen have used puppets (such as Paddington Bear), and a Finnish teacher I observed had a cool punk-rock puppet that her 12-year-olds reacted well to. They all wanted to speak with the puppet, and that can be complicated in a class of 24. However, the puppet in the classroom is a nice reminder to use English.

I hope these ideas will help you find ways of encouraging your learners to use the target language without punishing the use of the local language. Enjoy!

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