

Professional Reflections on “*Should We Allow Students to Use Thai in the English Classroom?*”

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Allowing or not allowing students to speak Thai in the English classroom has been one of the most controversial issues in the English language teaching for decades. Of course, we all recognize that the best way to learn is by doing. Thus, there is no better ways to develop fluency than to maximize the use of English to communicate both in and outside classroom. Communicating in English in class is even more important in the situation in which students have limited opportunities to use English outside the classroom. However, can we really stop students from speaking Thai in the English class? We all know that it is extremely challenging to get students in a monolingual class to communicate with one other in English. Although students know that they need to speak English to develop their fluency, they will not hesitate to speak Thai to their peers. The more time spent on speaking Thai would mean the less opportunities for them to use English for communication. One could question whether using Thai would have any merit in promoting English for communication. Perhaps we should look into what researchers say about the use of the first language in the second language class.

Several studies have explored the use of the first language in the second language classroom. Despite students’ misuse and overuse of their first language as reported by DiNitto (2000), Platt and Brooks (1994) and perhaps not reported by many others, a number of studies reveal that one’s use of the first language does have some advantage. In fact, it could lead to gains in second language learning. In a study conducted by Storch and Wigglesworth (2003), the students in an English class as a foreign language in Australia used their first language to clarify and manage tasks as well as to explain vocabulary and grammatical points. Students’ verbalization or switching to the first language in fact signals their lack of words; a language behavior as such helps them to focus their learning attention and in turn remember the vocabulary or the language structure (Scott and de la Fuente, 2008 and van Lier, 1995). Additionally, the students’ search for words or explicit questioning definitely enables students to provide assistance for one another, hence increasing their verbal interaction (Ant’on and DiCamilla, 1998). Most importantly, students who were allowed to use their first language were found to be less stressful and more engaged in more extended conversation than those who were not (Ant’on and DiCamilla, 1998; Scott and de la Fuente, 2008). When tension is removed and communication sustained, students will be able to develop fluency. It should be noted that the above mentioned studies were conducted in the English as a Second language context (Storch and Wigglesworth, 2003) or in the foreign language context (Ant’on and DiCamilla, 1998; Scott and de la Fuente, 2008).

Despite the fact known to language teachers in Thailand that Thai students tend to speak Thai in their English class, no empirical studies have been reported in academic journals regarding the use of Thai language in the English language class. If we are to seriously tackle this issue, we need research to identify its causes and plausible solutions for Thai students. Once we have gained a good understanding of this tendency, we will be able to address the issue properly and effectively.

The Author

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Comments: We welcome your comments and also any information that are pertinent to this topic in your region. Also please let us have your suggestions for the next round of "Professional Reflections."

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