The Importance of Positive Feedback and Understanding in English-Medium Instruction

Many students fear English; not because of any property of the language, every language has its complexities, but because they learn to fear it. Indeed, years of meticulous attention to vocabulary, grammar and syntax lead students to believe that the ins and outs of English are second only to brain surgery. It is, therefore, important that English-medium courses address this problem early and consistently in order to facilitate the use of English as a means of expression and communication, not of linguistic nitpicking.

Hebrew speakers and teachers know this well, for in Israel Hebrew grammar is taught as late as high school. The logic behind this seemingly belated linguistic instruction, though, is rarely questioned, and for a good reason: the mechanics of Hebrew are taught only after it is safe to assume that students have acquired a sufficient range of experiences and examples to draw on and refer to. In fact, it is likely that many Israelis would have been equally wary of Hebrew, had they been expected to master its rules and structures at the initial stages of acquisition. Ulpans, unsurprisingly, follow the same logic.

Of course, not all aspects of English are equal. Reading and writing do demand higher levels of proficiency, but as with Hebrew, or any other native tongue for that matter, reaching those levels requires an initial taste or feel for the language in verbal communication. As we had all learned to walk before we could run, so we had all learned to speak our native tongues before we could read and write them. The chance to use English verbal communication in the context of engaging and relevant academic discussions, rather than as an end in itself, is thus a way to offer students a fresh start at using English as a medium.

So, how do we facilitate this process? First, by providing students with positive feedback on the very use of English, regardless of grammatical correctness or the validity of the spoken content. We all try to avoid that which causes us pain and do more of that which gives us pleasure. Speaking a language is no different. Showing students that when they use English they are praised and appreciated – not criticized or corrected – establishes a positive attitude toward the language, as well as creates a healthy learning environment. This is not to say that erroneous claims should be ignored or falsely hailed as correct, but that before any attention is paid to the content of the communication, the very act of communication should be marked and positively remarked on.

Second, emphasis ought to be placed on understanding by showing students that the meaning behind their words is registered, and by then responding in accordance with that meaning. After all, acknowledging a contribution without being able to say what it is amounts to pampering. Again, the issue is not whether the content of their words is valid, but that it is understood. This, moreover, serves a double purpose: it is another form of positive feedback, and it indicates that

communication is taking place. Indeed, showing students that their use of English is not only valued, but that it is also effective, does much to facilitate the expressive and communicative functions of the language, as well as to restores students' confidence in their ability to master these functions.

Here, then, are a few suggestions on how to perform the above:

- Let the students know that a course in English is a *mutual* challenge – that their help and cooperation are important to you.
- When a student says something in English, however ungrammatical, provide *instant* positive feedback: "great," "thank you," "good question/comment," etc.
- Avoid stopping or correcting students as they speak, even if it means making mistakes or using a few words in Hebrew. Be aware of your own facial expressions and body language to avoid communicating discomfort.
- Repeat or mirror students' questions/comments in English, or ask follow-up questions for clarification. Don't give up and don't rush switching to Hebrew!
- If a student makes a linguistic error you wish to correct, do so by slightly emphasizing the correct form when repeating or mirroring their words.
- Encourage students to help you and one another with difficult words or terms.
- Facilitate pair or group work *in English*, so students could communicate without the pressure of speaking in front of an audience.

In conclusion, students take their cues for linguistic competence from the communicative situations they are in. A conversational, encouraging and non-judgmental classroom, at least when it comes to English, offers both a corrective experience and a way to move forward – from a complex cognitive operation to a mutual exchange of ideas. The ideas themselves are, of course, another major challenge, but let them walk a little before they run.