

Primary Advice

By Helene J. Uchida

Q: I have two siblings in the same class. The older sister bosses around her younger brother in Japanese during the lesson. How can I get her to stop?
S.P., teacher
Kobe

A: Handling sibling dynamics in classroom

It is common for older siblings to boss around younger siblings; they naturally feel responsible in class because of the dynamics they transport from home. In addition, since they speak Japanese to each other at home, they may feel awkward using English to converse in class. You cannot change a pattern that has been years in the making, but, as their teacher, you can use it to your advantage.

I recommend that you have a chat with the sister and solicit her assistance. Tell her you respect her position as older sister and you need her to help the younger brother make a positive transition to the English classroom. Explain that your role in the classroom is to help both of them, as well as the other students, and her role is to focus on herself in class and help her brother at home. In other words, the English classroom is your domain and her home is hers.

I suggest that you and she form a support team for her brother. She needs to know:

- Your EFL classroom offers a unique atmosphere. At home they are surrounded by the comfort of family and Japanese, but your classroom is a community of students who are being given many chances to experience English through class activities. This means that they will embark on an adventure and encounter linguistic challenges and risks they would not encounter at home.

- For this reason, you will purposefully not be seating them together. You want the younger brother to think for himself and be able to interact in simple English in class on his own. It is okay if he makes mistakes. The key point is you want both of them to try on their own and to learn from their mistakes.

- Because the adventure you are taking them on is an English one, you frown upon students using Japanese. Home is the place for Japanese, and your classroom is the place for English.

- If and when the brother makes mistakes or needs help, you will help him. You want the older sister to focus on herself, go at her own pace, take risks and make her own mistakes in order to progress.

- Be sure to let her know that you would appreciate her helping her brother with English homework at home if and when he needs it. She should encourage him and compliment him when he does well.

- Plus, it would be fun for her to try to use English with him at home using such phrases as:

Yes, please/ No, thank you/ Here you are/ Thank you/ You're welcome/ Good morning/ Good night/ I'm home/ See you later/ Hurry up/ That was delicious/ Try/ You can do it!

You could print the phrases out in both languages and practice them with her. After she has mastered the phrases and has taught them to her brother, you could give her a certificate or a small present to thank her for being a "good" big sister.

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Readers are encouraged to send questions to Helene J. Uchida on any themes related to teaching English — particularly those at the elementary and junior high school level — to jn-edu@yomiuri.com with "Primary Advice" in the subject line. Questions to Uchida are also accepted via postcard at "Primary Advice," The Japan News, 1-7-1 Otemachi, Chiyoda Ward, Tokyo 100-8055. Questions should preferably be written in English, accompanied by your name, occupation and the area in which you live.



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The next installment will appear on Nov. 9.