

We only learn language once. The role of the mother tongue in FL classrooms: death of a dogma

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All the praise that is heaped on the classical languages as an educational tool is due in double measure to the mother tongue, which should more justly be called the 'Mother of Languages'; every new language can only be established by comparison with it... (Jean Paul Friedrich Richter, 1806)

If there is another 'language teaching revolution' round the corner, it will have to assemble a convincing set of arguments to support some alternative (bilingual?) principle of equal power. (Howatt, 1984: 298)

Using the mother tongue, we have (1) learnt to think, (2) learnt to communicate and (3) acquired an intuitive understanding of grammar. The mother tongue is therefore the greatest asset people bring to the task of foreign language learning and provides a Language Acquisition Support System. This theory, which is an alternative to prevailing thought, is presented, explained and put into a historical perspective. The paper does not only redress an imbalance but concludes that drastic re-thinking of FL methodology is called for.

BACKGROUND: A RED CARD FOR THE MOTHER TONGUE

Since the Great Reform at the end of the 19th century, the role of the mother tongue has been second only to grammar as the most discussed methodological problem. At present, the official guidelines in many countries recommend that lessons be planned to be as monolingual as possible, drawing on the mother tongue only when difficulties arise. A consensus has been reached in favour of a kind of monolingualism with small concessions: "There is little point in trying to stamp it out completely" (Harmer, 2001: 132). The mother tongue is generally regarded as being an evasive manoeuvre which is to be used only in emergencies. Effective bilingual teaching techniques are, therefore, as good as unknown in schools. It looks as though the so-called direct method, now operating under the new banner of the communicative approach, has triumphed.

SPOILSPORTS: STUBBORN TEACHERS, THE PERSONAL OBSERVATIONS OF LEARNERS AND RESEARCH IN THE CLASSROOM

If only it weren't for a small but constant flow of articles, in which stubborn teachers write in opposition to the prevailing ideology and describe their bilingual techniques! – a wealth of telling practical experience, often without theoretical pretence or an in-depth understanding of the long history behind the topic. These works are usually apologetic in tone. The topic 'mother tongue' is a well-kept family secret for many, a "skeleton in the cupboard... a taboo subject, a source of embarrassment", according to Prodromou (2002: 6). Time and time again, using the mother tongue is accompanied by feelings of guilt. As a result, most of these contributions are more or less timid attempts at legitimation, and hence more or less cautious formulations.

Alternatively, we can look back at a case involving a language lecturer at York University, who inspired everybody with her Italian course boasting fifty participants: "She's breaking every rule there is. She translates everything as she goes along, she mixes in a lot of grammar, she has students parroting phrases and answers" (*Times Educational Supplement*, 3 October 1975). More to the point, perhaps, is the fact that there are carefully crafted bilingual methods such as Curran's counselling approach and suggestopaedia, which has enjoyed some popularity as an "alternative method" for teaching mature-age classes.

How is this possible? Can both sides be right – the avoidance of, indeed, the ban on the mother tongue and its opposite, its regular

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use in presenting a text? Not really, and so these successes are either explained away or ignored. Here, it is not the bilingual teaching techniques that are critical, but rather the energetic and good-humoured personality of the lecturer in York, her meticulous planning; or it is the friendly learning atmosphere created by the suggestopaedia technique, which is often accompanied by music and other aesthetic elements. It is not the translations.

I find it particularly revealing when accomplished teachers learn a new language and realise that, as learners of a language, they want the very thing they are denying their own pupils. This, among other things, is what an English teacher noted down for herself when she was participating in a course on modern Greek: “I’m not satisfied with getting the gist, I want to understand every word.” “Translating the text was good, lots of dictionary work.” “I’m going to learn the dialogue by heart, translate it into Greek and then back into English” (McDonough, 2002: 405). She sees the contradiction between what she writes and her own approach as a teacher, she sees it in her colleagues as well, but she does not offer any solution. Don’t we all know it in our bones: when we encounter a new piece of language, we want to know straight away and without further ado what it means precisely, so that we can put it to use immediately, work with it and make the most of it? Isn’t it only the “experts” who tell us that the slow struggle for comprehension with a teacher miming and arm-waving and drawing little stick-figures on the board is preferable? Or are we content with inaccurate guessing and prepared to wait perhaps for weeks until the penny drops? Let us do what comes naturally – it is all so blindingly obvious.

The imperative to abide by a doctrine of monolingualism cannot reconcile these opposing attitudes. 1967 saw the publication of C. J. Dodson’s groundbreaking work, *Language Teaching and the Bilingual Method*. In it, Dodson presented a new bilingual method, conceived on the basis of a series of controlled experiments on teaching – a frontal attack on the ban on the mother tongue.

As is very rarely the case, Dodson’s work inspired researchers from various countries who then tried either to replicate his experiments directly or to carry out similarly structured comparisons of methods: bilingual techniques were found to be superior to their monolingual counterparts, always (Sastri, 1970; Walatara, 1973; Meijer, 1974; Ishii *et al.*, 1979). Butzkamm (1980) reported on a successful two-year experiment with the bilingual approach in a German grammar school. Dodson’s work was again validated by Kaczmarek (1988) and Caldwell (1990). Kasjan’s (1995, 1996) feasibility study on German for Japanese university students is also explicitly based on Dodson’s seminal study.

THE DOGGEDNESS OF DOGMA

The experts as a whole, however, reacted sceptically. The Anglo-American mainstream simply moved on. Many young native speakers from anglophone countries have spilled out into the world and make a living teaching English. Most of them teach their own language – at least, at first – without any relation to the culture and language of their pupils. Famous exceptions include the “greats” in our field: Harold Palmer in Japan, Michael West in India or, notably, Anthony Burgess in Malaysia. “One cannot but suspect that this theory of rigid avoidance of the mother tongue may be in part motivated by the fact that the teacher of English does perhaps not know the learner’s mother tongue”, argues West (1962: 48). This “English-only” policy has been classified as “neocolonialistic” (Auerbach, 1993: 13). The international dominance of English native speakers, who find absolution in the dogma of monolingualism when they cannot understand the language of their pupils, together with the cheaper mass production of strictly English-speaking textbooks in the Anglo-American mother country, constitutes one of the reasons behind the sanctification of, and the demand for, monolingualism in the classroom.¹

THE ALTERNATIVE: THE MOTHER TONGUE AS A BASE OF REFERENCE

I present a theory that restores the mother tongue to its rightful place as the most important ally a foreign language can have, one which would, at the same time, redeem some 2000 years of documented foreign language teaching, which has always held the mother tongue in high esteem. The mother tongue is, for all school subjects, including foreign language lessons, a child’s strongest ally and should, therefore, be used systematically. In contrast, methodological thought throughout the 20th century has been dominated by a negative metaphor: foreign language teachers build islands that are in constant danger of being flooded by the sea of the mother tongue. They have to fight back this sea, build dams against it, stem its tide.

This much is true: every new language is confronted by an already-existing mother tongue. All languages are competitors in the sense that if they are not used, they may be lost, and there is only a limited amount of time that can be shared between them. Precisely because the mother tongue is always available, it is so easy to avoid using a foreign language – a constant temptation for pupils and teachers. We do not learn any language by using another one. This is a truth that has nonetheless led to false beliefs. And, in contrast to this view, I

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present the following theory:

Using the mother tongue, we have (1) learnt to think, (2) learnt to communicate and (3) acquired an intuitive understanding of grammar. The mother tongue opens the door, not only to its own grammar, but to all grammars, inasmuch as it awakens the potential for universal grammar that lies within all of us. This foreknowledge is the result of interactions between a first language and our fundamental linguistic endowment, and is the foundation on which we build our Selves. It is the greatest asset people bring to the task of foreign language learning. For this reason, the mother tongue is the master key to foreign languages, the tool which gives us the fastest, surest, most precise, and most complete means of accessing a foreign language.

The theory predicts that the mother tongue as a cognitive and pedagogical resource will be more important for pupils of seven or eight upwards, by which time the mother tongue has taken firm root, and it will be more in evidence in the conventional classroom, where exposure to the FL is inevitably restricted, than in immersion situations.

THE THEORY IN DETAIL

This theory can be broken down into 10 statements:

Maxim 1

The FL learner must build upon existing skills and knowledge acquired in and through the MT. Monolingual lessons without the help of the mother tongue are extrinsically possible; however, monolingual learning is an intrinsic impossibility. No one can simply turn off what they already know. We postulate that the mother tongue is “silently” present in beginners, even when lessons are kept monolingual.

Just as we build upon our abilities to vocalise, to read and to write, all of which have been developed via our mother tongue, so too we are unable to switch off our knowledge of the world, again acquired through the mother tongue. “Ignoring or forbidding English will not do, for learners inevitably engage in French-English associations and formulations in their minds” (Hammerly, 1989: 51). “Translation/transfer is a natural phenomenon and an inevitable part of second language acquisition..., regardless of whether or not the teacher offers or ‘permits’ translation” (Harbord, 1992: 351). Ever since the days of Sweet and Palmer, the irrepressibility of associations in the MT has been regularly confirmed as a sad, but inevitable, fact of life by teachers observing in their own classrooms.

This attitude, however, has a false ring to it: “You can banish the MT from the classroom, but you cannot banish it from the pupils’ heads.” It sounds as if we were in fact saying: “Sorry, but we can’t do anything about it, so let’s accept it”. However, teachers should do everything to work *with* this natural tendency rather than against it –

not because it is inevitable, but because it is a vital stage for the beginner: without it there would be blank incomprehension. Successful learners capitalise on the vast amount of linguistic skills and world knowledge they have accumulated via the MT. Every teacher quite naturally assumes that his or her pupils already know what words such as *birthday* and *postman* mean within a given culture before they set about explaining the words *anniversaire* or *facteur*. Consider how often a child will have celebrated birthdays, or seen a postman. Even if we deal with cultures that restrict the concept of birthday to the day of one’s birth, the MT word would still be a suitable starting point for comprehension. Rather than reconceptualise the world, we need to extend our concepts, with any necessary cultural adjustment or refinement. For the beginner, becoming aware of meanings automatically involves connecting them with the MT – until the FL has established an ever-more complex network for itself.

I have borrowed the phrase Language Acquisition Support System (LASS) from Bruner (1983) who uses it along with environmental “scaffolding” in the context of L1 acquisition. In FL learning, the LASS is provided by the MT with learners engaging in their own self-scaffolding. Our job is to assist them in this task instead of ignoring or even trying to suppress what goes on in the pupils’ minds.

Maxim 2

Ersatz-techniques for meaning-conveyance function less well than the MT and can even be harmful.

Textbook illustrations and board work, along with the careful selection and grading of words and structures are compensatory aids that facilitate a monolingual approach but can often lead to misunderstanding in unpredictable ways. Unfortunately, they may prevent pupils from making the right kind of associations with MT equivalents (e.g., “I see! *Anniversaire* means birthday.”). For many phrases, only a clarification in the mother tongue can bring pupils to trust in a foreign language expression („Können wir nicht mal was anderes machen?“ “Can’t we do something else?”). Support aids, as well as the resourcefulness of proficient teachers, simply cover up the fact that the fundamental assumption, the monolingualism of teaching, needs to be reviewed.

Studies in which informal meaning checks were used at the end of a lesson have repeatedly shown that pupils misunderstand more than their teachers realise. Teachers often assumed that the new expressions had been explained so carefully, precisely and clearly that nothing could go wrong.

“Look at the sky, it’s going to rain” was a textbook sentence accompanied by a picture. Half the class understood “sky” as the foreign language word for the dark cloud in the picture. This is how a misconception nests itself in the mind, especially as “cloud” would also fit perfectly, if not better, in the original sentence.

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But as soon as the pupils want to make up their own sentences and use “sky” when they mean “cloud”, all is lost. Precision of meaning is important; rough comprehension is simply not good enough.

The following quotation from a student’s retrospective self-report illustrates the confusion and frustration caused by incomprehension: ‘In the end, I got it wrong to the point where Mrs. H. wanted me to give the meaning of the sentence: “Can you see the man?” I interpreted the sentence as: “Kennst Du diesen Mann?” [Do you know this man?] My classmates laughed in a subdued manner. Obviously, they knew better. I was deeply embarrassed and I hated the teacher for that. After all, the sentence “Can you see the man?” sounded to me perfectly like the English version of “Kennst Du diesen Mann?” I took the sound of “see the” for “diesen” and “can” for “kennst”. (Jochen M.)

Whereas visual aids of all sorts can enrich teaching, the rigorous selection and grading of texts can be counterproductive. The “content vacuum” and the “topic-neutrality” which have been found to characterise beginners’ classes (Mitchell *et al.*, 1988), are largely due to the fact that textbook authors are forced to order their pedagogic material and minimise both lexical and grammatical randomness in order to make monolingualism possible. (Remember the typical Berlitz diet, still fed to Berlitz clients today: “This is a book. It is big. It is on the table...”). There are more exciting things to say than what colour one’s uniform is. Without such restrictions, we would have different, richer texts.

Maxim 3

MT aids make it easier to conduct whole lessons in the foreign language. Pupils gain in confidence and, paradoxically, become less dependent on their MT.

This point addresses a central misunderstanding which probably explains why a century-old error is only now being corrected. “Give the devil an inch and he’ll take a mile”, seems to be the accepted wisdom. But when used properly, the MT steals very little time away from the FL and, in fact, helps to establish it as the general means of communication in the classroom. The lesson and the organisation of the lesson still take place in the foreign language. This fulfils a necessary and correct requirement of the direct method. Paradoxically, a ‘foreign language friendly’ atmosphere is best achieved through selective use of the mother tongue. This is how we proceed:

Teacher: “You’ve skipped a line. Du hast eine Zeile übersprungen. You’ve skipped a line.”

Teacher: “I mean the last word but one. Das vorletzte Wort. The last word but one.”

The teacher, on the spot, inserts a translation between repetitions of an unknown phrase, almost as an aside, spoken in a different voice or with a

slight break in the flow of speech to mark it as an “intruder” (“sandwich-technique”). The teacher could even write the expression up on the blackboard, in an area specifically set aside for this purpose, getting pupils to copy it down into a separate exercise book, perhaps at the end of the lesson so as not to interrupt the ongoing business. This three-step procedure can solve many problems, but needs a counterpart when pupils initiate utterances and insert a MT phrase. These should not be forbidden but must be seized upon by the teacher:

Pupil: “Ich wollt’ das auch sagen.”

Teacher: “Oh, I see. In English it is: ‘That’s what I was going to say’. Try it, please.”

MT expressions that come from the pupils spontaneously also need to be written up and collected. Only then can the teacher insist on the use of the FL phrases, and indeed must now do so – henceforth the same expressions in the MT are proscribed. If we keep some self-discipline, so will our pupils, and we need not fear a break in the dam. The timely, well-directed use of the MT will not end the tough day-to-day battle that teachers endure in trying to establish an FL atmosphere among their pupils. It will, however, temper it considerably.

Dodson (1967, 1972) developed the sandwich-procedure for teaching dialogues. The teacher conveys the meaning of the lines by giving utterance equivalents. Here’s a line from a dialogue I taught to German pupils: “Would you have marked it wrong?” “Hätten Sie’s denn angestrichen?” “Would you have marked it wrong?” Through the “sandwiching” of the translation between the repeated lines of the text, the students are led to repeat the line directly after the FL stimulus. Thus, there is no interference from the translation, which must be as idiomatic and suited to the context as possible, so that every pupil catches on straight away. They know the exact impact of the utterance because of the accompanying intonation, voice quality, facial expressions and gestures, including the effect of typical German modal particles such as “denn”, “doch”, or “eigentlich”, the salt and pepper of German speech. This type of meaning-conveyance is a very long way away from both monolingual definitions or paraphrases and bilingual word-lists, because it includes the pragmatic aspects of meaning and can render emotional overtones. Pupils will be less coy about speaking the FL. They understand so clearly that they trust themselves to use the expression directly and to vary it according to their own needs. And that is precisely the key factor for success in learning: what the learners do with what they have correctly comprehended. The more time and effort that is invested at this stage, the less chance the MT has to cause interference or obstruct the learning process. On the contrary, the native language launches, as it were, the pupils’ canoes out into

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the foreign-language current, which then grabs hold of them and carries them safely downstream.

We are reminded of Harold Palmer's distinction between a quick, initial grasp of meaning and the subsequent acquisition of fluency in using the new language items, the latter requiring considerable time and effort. 'This important distinction was forgotten when the pendulum swung in the 1960s to audio-visual methods... Insecure teachers, anxious to be in the fashion, were to be seen going through every kind of contortion... trying to get precise meanings across to their class without letting slip a word of English.' (Hawkins, 1981: 133).²

Maxim 4

MT aids can promote more authentic, message-orientated communication than might be found in lessons where they are avoided.

Quick translations in the MT often help without interrupting the flow of a conversation or even being noticed. As is evidenced in many lesson transcripts I have collected, pupils are more likely to respond spontaneously and to take risks, voicing their personal opinions, and relating more about their private lives; at the same time, teachers can establish friendly relations with pupils and better explore both current and unexpected themes – simply because short aids or prompts in the mother tongue can help keep a foreign language conversation going and open a space for learners. This kind of spontaneity and personal involvement fulfils the fundamental requirement of the modern communicative approach. The non-use of the MT, however, seriously constrains what can be said and read. MT aids will save pupils from a feeling of frustration which will eventually lead them to avoid all topics of personal interest.

The simple truth is that the call for "real" communication and the ban on the MT are conflicting demands. Apart from activity instructions, which in themselves can be quite complex, there are innumerable occasions in the life of a class for personal remarks to a pupil, for light banter creating warmth and acceptance. There are also many unforeseen incidents that ought to be dealt with immediately. The language required to solve these problems is often far beyond the language taught currently in the coursebook. Teachers have three options: (1) use the MT; (2) ignore the whole business, suppressing remarks or comments they would normally make; (3) simplify as best they can and use the sandwich-technique. All these options have a place in the FL classroom. It is only the third option, however, that can breathe communicative life into a classroom and, at the same time, help sustain a FL atmosphere throughout.

A German teaching assistant in an English school was at first surprised to find that all her pupils' parents held one of three jobs until she realised the teacher wanted the pupils to concentrate on well-memorised words and did not encourage pupils to venture beyond the textbook.

The error is widespread and is reported again and again by my students:

When we had to write something about ourselves and someone asked for a particular word, she always said we should use the vocabulary we knew. After a while we just invented something because we knew that she was not at all interested in what we wrote but just in grammatical correctness. In my opinion, it was a pity because young pupils in particular need to feel that the teacher is not only interested in their learning capacity but also in their personality and their interests. (Stephanie H.)

Language learning is certainly not an exercise in fearful error avoidance. Ultimately it is in message-orientated activities that communicative competence can flourish. A trainee teacher reports:

Now the teaching became more message-orientated. The pupils had to tell their neighbours what they had done during the week. Together with the teacher, I walked from student to student and helped them if they needed a word. The new words were written on the board, and repeated by the whole group afterwards. Both students and teachers enjoyed this very much and I received the honorary title of "walking dictionary". (Ursula N.)

The following cartoon neatly captures what my students have often observed, namely that teachers tend to give praise in the FL, but criticise pupils in the MT.

"MT aids will save pupils from a feeling of frustration which will eventually lead them to avoid all topics of personal interest"

Notizen aus dem Lehreraalltag



von Wilhelm NÜchter

“It was a shame that she spoke German when she got really angry because we would have loved to learn to swear in French.” (Sandra W.)

Many situations and issues that crop up are simply left unexploited, because MT short-cuts to meanings are frowned upon. But when used properly, short MT insertions can function as a “conversational lubricant” (Butzkamm, 1998) and communication is no longer paid mere lip-service.

Maxim 5

MT techniques allow teachers to use richer, more authentic texts sooner. This means more comprehensible input and faster acquisition.

The measured and well-calculated contribution of the mother tongue can allow pupils to tackle more difficult texts sooner. Banal texts without educational value, on the other hand, jeopardise FL lessons, particularly those that have been started late.³

We find excellent texts all the time that we do not use because they contain passages that are too difficult, requiring too much time and effort. Here, it is possible to use bilingual editions to help us with certain passages. Why do we not clarify these passages by giving translations to the pupils in advance? Interested pupils, in particular, often resort to using these comprehension aids. With difficult texts, the languages share the load.

Alternatively, we can recommend pupils to look at the foreign language versions of their personal, favourite books first read in their mother tongue. Why can't they re-read their favourite *Asterix* or *Tintin* story in French as well, and maybe even talk about it briefly in front of the class? German pupils have been known to read the *Harry Potter* books in English *after* they had read the German version or seen the films in their MT.

There are various ways in which MT aids can stimulate students to read authentic texts which might seem too daunting if such support were not provided. A series of children's books by O'Sullivan & Rösler employs a new kind of language mix. The stories usually involve encounters between English and German teenagers who sometimes try to speak the partner language but generally stick to their own language and practise a sort of receptive bilingualism. The narrator switches between the languages according to the situation:

She marched straight up to him.

“Was willst du?” she demanded.

Edzard wurde rot. “Wie meinst du das, was will ich? Ich habe doch gar nichts gesagt.”

Fiona was angry. “Gar nichts gesagt, aber... aber...” Shit! This bloody language. To hell with it, she'd just have to try it in English. “You've been following me all day long. I mean it's bad enough you having crashed into me on the bicycle yesterday and then having raced off without saying a word, but if you want to apologize, you don't really have to follow me

around all day to do so.”

“Sorry”, entschuldigte sich Edzard. Er zögerte einen Moment. “I didn't want to make you sick”, fuhr er fort. Fiona had to smile. “Make me sick? What do you mean?”

“Verstehst du mich, wenn ich Deutsch rede?” fragte er zurück.

“Yeah, more or less.”

“Ich wollte sagen, daß ich dich nicht kränken wollte.”

“You didn't want to annoy me. OK, but then why were you following me?” (O'Sullivan & Rösler, 1986: 12)

Those of my students who knew the books as teenagers were enthusiastic about them.

Maxim 6

Bilingual techniques allow teachers to bypass the grammatical progression of textbooks. No postponement of the subjunctive.

“Gestern war Sonntag” is just as easy for a five-year-old to understand as “Heute ist Montag”, but not for two-year-olds given their undeveloped understanding of temporal space. English pupils who have been encouraged early on to say things like “Ich habe leider mein Buch vergessen” [I'm sorry I forgot my book] have a reference point from which to make sense of the form when it comes to be formally taught. The reluctance to introduce the past tenses very early on does not take into consideration the pioneering work that the mother tongue has already done, much to the benefit of the foreign language. Similarly, English pupils could easily handle a subjunctive such as “Ich hätte gern eine Cola” in their first week of lessons. Again, this will make it easier to choose authentic texts. The appreciation of this point alone could revolutionise foreign language teaching worldwide.

In an English grammar book, we read something like: “Together with the infinitive of the perfect, *needn't* assumes past meaning, thus negating, or questioning, the necessity of an already-completed action.” Of course, it starts to make sense with an example. But it makes even more sense if the example is accompanied by an idiomatic translation. Now the explanation is superfluous:

Du hättest nichts sagen brauchen.

You needn't have said anything.

Er hätte nicht kommen brauchen.

He needn't have come.

The more difficult it gets, the more we need the MT. Here, oral utterance equivalents as used by Dodson are best (intonation!):

Das kann ich auch nicht essen

Je ne peux pas manger ça non plus.

I can't eat this either.

Das kann ich nicht auch noch essen.

Je ne peux pas manger ça en plus.

I can't eat this as well.

“There are various ways in which MT aids can stimulate students to read authentic texts which might seem too daunting if such support were not provided”

This example is by no means far-fetched. The problem of meaning-conveyance has mostly been discussed in terms of individual words – whether a word equivalence such as “la paix” = “peace” can be avoided by means of a monolingual explanation. This leaves out a large number of the greatest problems learners have with FL meanings, namely those which are largely determined by context. This becomes obvious when using comic strips in the classroom.

Apart from clarifying grammatical functions and nuances of grammatical meanings by idiomatic translations, we can clarify grammatical structures through literal translation or the “Technik der Spiegelung” (mirroring), although perhaps only for learners whose MT is firmly in place. This is a time-honoured technique and frequently used in modern grammars of “exotic” languages. It is a shame that it is so little used in classrooms. Thus, for example, “... we may note a disconcerting logic about German which, putting the adjective before the noun, like all Germanic languages, puts the whole of an adjective phrase there, too. English has ‘buttered bread’, but ‘bread spread with butter and jam’; German has ‘with butter and strawberry jam spread bread’. In other words, in speaking German, one must have the entire content of one’s adjective phrase ready before the noun which it qualifies makes its appearance” (Burgess, 1992: 110). So this is how German word-order could be explained, again just once, at a first encounter:

Der in wenigen Minuten einlaufende Zug
*The in a few minutes arriving train
(The train due to arrive in a few minutes)

Schließlich kam er
*Eventually came he

Ich muß mein Auto waschen
*I must my car wash.

German compounds, if they are not transparent at first sight, could also be clarified: Germans say Handschuh “hand-shoe” for “glove”, and “Faustregel”, i.e. “rule of fist” instead of “rule of thumb”. That way, the foreign word has a familiar ring to it, and has become less foreign. At the same time, we might refer English learners to Shakespeare (Lady Macbeth: “O! Never shall sun that morrow see!”) or the Authorised Version of the Bible: “Woman, why weepest thou?” [Weib, warum weinst du?] (John, 20: 13).

Finally, a serial verb construction from a remote (West-African) language:

nam utom eemi ni mi
do work this give me
‘Do this work for me’ (Givón, 1989: 331)

The language learner needs to understand both what is meant (the message) and how it is said (syntactical transparency). If the phrases s/he uses remain structurally opaque s/he will produce errors such as *voici sont les livres* and *Rebecca j’aime le EastEnders* (= Rebecca likes East-Enders).

I have always found word-for-word and sometimes morpheme-for-morpheme translations an elegant and economical way of helping learners see through unaccustomed and odd-sounding FL structures without resorting to grammatical terminology. So have countless language teachers in past centuries. This is grammatical explanation by imitation, not by analysis.

Leading German textbooks have bilingual grammar and vocabulary sections (*must not = nicht dürfen*). Here, common sense has prevailed, but only part of the problem has been solved since the practice remains without a solid theoretical underpinning. Moreover, many countries still favour purely monolingual textbooks. It is in these countries, where purely TL textbooks are widespread, that pupils truly suffer.

Maxim 7

We need to associate the new with the old. To exclude MT links would deprive us of the richest source for building cross-linguistic networks. No quarantine for MT cognates and related words.

The well-directed and informative use of lexical and syntactic parallels between the mother tongue and the European foreign languages taught in schools promotes retention and deepens the understanding of the historical affinity of language and culture. The relationship between languages should be clearly established and not ignored or suppressed. While it is normal to associate new items with known items within the FL, or even form associations between two foreign languages, the MT, the most powerful instrument and greatest treasure-house of words, is often excluded in building networks. Frankly, this situation seems to me absurd, and the doctrine of monolingualism is clearly to blame for it. MT cognates can function as decoding devices even without being suitable translation equivalents and can help students to remember the target word. Even more important, creating links to MT words can extend the pupils’ knowledge of their own language. When I taught a dialogue which started with the line, “You’ve got a C in history”, I found to my surprise that very few 12-year-olds knew the word “historisch” and all those who thought they knew the word said it meant something like “famous” or “well known”. So both languages can profit. The study of cognates and family resemblances can be made interesting to many pupils especially if it sheds light on our common history and heritage. Pupils, by themselves, would not see the semantic link between “matching exercise” which they find in their coursebook and a “football match” or “Match” as used in German. “WC” is used in German too, but only English tells us what the letters stand for. What is the relation between “blackboard”, “boarding-school” and German “Bord”? For English pupils to know that “häßlich” is “ugly” may be enough, but why not make the connection with “hate” and “hassen”? There are literally thousands of related words to be explored. “Only connect...” (E. M.

“The language learner needs to understand both what is meant (the message) and how it is said (syntactical transparency)”

“MT constructions act as a default, stepping in when our memory fails”

Forster), because connecting begets understanding, and understanding begets sympathy.

Maxim 8

It is not possible to avoid interference, but it can be greatly reduced.

For a century now, teachers have been served up trivial and banal arguments that nobody would deny: “One cannot learn a foreign language if one constantly speaks another language”; likewise: “the mother tongue causes interference errors at all levels of language”. Compare the meanings of *figure* with *la figure* and *die Figur*; “Heute jeder hat einen Computer”, modelled on English word order, or “We make sometimes trips”, modelled on German word-order. It looks as if the native language constantly gets in the way, walks in uninvited and tempts us into unwanted errors. However, the perception that the mother tongue apparently traps and tricks us into making mistakes prevents us from realising a deeper truth: interference is nothing other than knowledge or skills that we do not yet possess. MT constructions act as a default, stepping in when our memory fails, offers nothing else and lets us down. What can the learner do other than use what he already knows to make up for what he does not know? “The problem of ‘interference’ viewed thus reduces to the problem of ignorance” (Newmark & Reibel, 1968: 160).

“Can I write a double point?” (= use a colon) a pupil asks. He does not know the English equivalent for “Doppelpunkt” yet and is helping himself in the most natural way. The solution to such interference problems lies in versatile and autonomous use of appropriate expressions in life-like situations – after the problem has been identified and rectified. Such lexical transfers are common in the speech of developing bilinguals: Thomas: *I’m just schraubing this on.* (Pause) *What do you say for that, Mum?* – Mother: *Screwing.* – Thomas: *I’m just screwing this on – see?* (Saunders, 1988: 182).

Even the best teaching can never fully prevent us from disruptive interferences. Uncritical carry-overs from the MT can best be phased out, not by avoiding the MT in fear but by using it well. Again, some *faux amis* (of the lexical and grammatical sort) stay unrecognised if they are not contrasted with the mother tongue. Instead of skirting around them, we meet them head on. In the Nijverdal experiment (Meijer, 1974), it was possible to reject the hypothesis that bilingual techniques as used by Dodson lead to more interference errors related to the mother tongue than are found in strictly monolingual lessons.

Maxim 9

Paradoxically, the counter-productive, haphazard use of the mother tongue may be an unwanted side-effect of the doctrine of monolingualism.

The native language must be used systematically, selectively and in judicious doses, and never in

the inconsiderate, lazy and time-consuming way it is so often employed today by disaffected teachers. It is shocking how often exactly what was supposed to be avoided actually does take place, namely that the prevailing classroom language is in fact the mother tongue. Less skilled and less proficient teachers can have problems maintaining an officially monolingual teaching paradigm. Rather than being used, therefore, the mother tongue is misused. Teachers simply succumb to the ease of conducting the class in the MT.

Conversely, pupils are well known to protest that they cannot keep up in FL-only lessons because the level of conversation is over their heads. The results of a poll of some 1300 Year 9 pupils of both sexes across four English secondary schools revealed the following:

One of the biggest frustrations for underperforming boys was not understanding the point of a lesson and what the teacher was trying to get them to do. This was particularly so when the lesson was solely or mainly conducted in the foreign language. When a lesson is all in the target language, those underperforming hadn’t a clue what was going on. They were vociferous about that. The feeling of being lost in language lessons was so clear. It’s sad really. I had never thought of them not quite knowing what is going on. They may vaguely know, but not why they are doing it. (Thornton, 1999: 11)

English pupils have a particularly hard life. Many do not have textbooks with bilingual vocabulary and grammar sections in the appendix. Pent-up frustration explodes: teacher and pupils alike may end up talking in their mother tongue alone.⁴

Maxim 10

All newly-acquired FL items have to sink roots in our minds which are eventually deep enough for the items to function independently of the MT.

This is possible, however, only through the sensible and timely use of the foreign language, and not by avoiding the MT on principle – compare the change in Britain to decimal coinage when prices in the old currency continued to be displayed until the value of the new currency had become meaningful to most people. Similarly, with growing proficiency in the foreign language, the use of the MT becomes largely redundant and the FL will stand on its own two feet. This natural decline in aid from the mother tongue can be explained in terms of the weakening of a temporary internal response in the wake of an overarching association: it simply gets practised away. “The indirect bond [with the MT] is short-circuited out by practice just as memorial dodges for remembering people’s names are eliminated once the name is established” (West, 1962: 48). Brown (1972) called it “cognitive pruning”. There seems to be a neurological principle of economy at work (Butzkamm, 1989/2002a: 36ff.). “Thinking” in the

FL is not an all-or-nothing affair. It begins in the very first lesson of a FL when pupils learn to respond automatically to and with formulas such as *Good morning, thank you, yes or no*. Both kinds of behaviour occur side by side: “I do make mental translations and these give me a feeling of security, yet I do find myself thinking directly in the language when I read, or go over an assignment, or create utterances in class” (Rivers, 1979: 71).

RELEVANT RESULTS FROM ACQUISITION RESEARCH

Findings from neighbouring disciplines support our theory.

(1) In cases of naturally occurring bilingualism both languages help each other out, supplementing each other reciprocally, and disrupting each other’s development far less than previously assumed. Saunders (1988) and Tracy (1996), among others, clearly argue that languages can promote each other’s development reciprocally. The proper model for foreign language teaching should really have been not first-language acquisition but rather the natural acquisition of a second language. Numerous studies of children growing up with two languages in the family have shown that they employ both languages in such a way that the one is used as a help for the other. If, for instance, the child wants to phone its grandparents in France to tell them about something which it has not yet processed in French, it will first get help by asking “Comment dit-on, I cut my finger?” The lack of vocabulary is solved in the most easily conceivable way (Kielhöfer & Jonekeit, 1983). Requests for linguistic assistance take different forms; they are the rule, not the exception. Also, bilingual speakers often feel the need to reassure themselves in their stronger language. I find those examples most convincing where the children provide for themselves translations which have been deliberately withheld from them. Leopold (1949: 33), author of the classical four-volume study on his own children raised bilingually, once spoke of “Unterwäsche” and overheard his two-and-a-half-year-old daughter saying “Unterwäsche means underwear.” She was reassuring herself in her dominant language. There is another note in his diary at a later date: “When she asks me for the meaning of an unfamiliar word..., I give her as a rule not the English translation, but a simple explanation in German. Often she says then the more familiar English equivalent to show that she has understood.” (Leopold 1949: 146). Bilingual children thus create clarity of meaning and consciously practise their languages at the same time.

(2) A bilingual approach is gaining ground in the schools for the congenitally deaf. More and more teachers use sign language, the natural L1 of the profoundly deaf, as a bridge to verbal languages (Hager Cohen, 1995; Butzkamm & Butzkamm, 1999).

(3) A “generalized capacity to process syntax”

is postulated which helps the acquisition of a native, as well as a foreign language, according to Skehan (1989: 33), for example. The ability to learn foreign languages easily can, therefore, be predicted by looking at the mother tongue. Ganshow & Sparks (2001: 87) summarise the results of the studies related to this topic, concluding that “native language skills in the phonological/orthographic, syntactic, and semantic codes form the basic foundation for FL learning.” For a century, a large part of the language teaching profession has ignored the very foundations on which FL learning is built.

BILINGUAL PRACTICE

Does the theory work in practice? There are a variety of bilingual practices. They do not, however, in any way belong to the standard repertoire of techniques used in the schools. Some ‘historical’ teaching techniques need only to be revamped a little. In addition to the techniques mentioned above I will name five more ways of using the mother tongue that appear to be particularly important – all have historical precedents, and accomplish different objectives in different teaching contexts. Deller & Rinvoluceri (2002) contains more than a hundred teaching suggestions involving the use of the MT.

1. In some bilingual nursery schools and elementary schools, for instance, in Alsace, children spend half of their time being looked after by one teacher, who speaks only French, and the other half of their time with another, who speaks only German. Since the teachers only ever use their mother tongue, the technique gives the impression of being a monolingual (or a bi-monolingual) one; however, the children are perfectly free to answer in their mother tongue throughout the first year, and only slowly grow into the second language (Petit, 1999).
2. A teaching technique that uses the generative principle of language acquisition; a new form of bilingual structure exercise (bilingual cue drills, translation pattern practice; Butzkamm 1973; 2002b).
3. Teaching the intelligent use of bilingual dictionaries first, and introducing monolingual dictionaries later (Thompson, 1987)
4. Adult students prepare special topics in their MT before transferring to the FL. There were clear gains in precision and clarity, reports Tudor (1987).
5. Translations of short passages into the MT can be turned into an imaginative and highly interactive exercise (Edge, 1986).

It should be added that the direct method is not obligatory with linguistically mixed classes. If there is some continuity, we can ask former pupils to provide translations of excellent basic texts we might want to use again and again. These translations are then given to newcomers to help

“native language skills in the phonological/orthographic, syntactic, and semantic codes form the basic foundation for FL learning”

them digest the new material at home before it is dealt with in class. Thus we work with “linguistic informants” like the missionaries who did everything they could to find bilingual helpers, and had no trust at all in a monolingual approach, which they knew from experience made linguistic survival so much harder.

CONCLUSION

The teaching of foreign languages has yet to reach that point where answerable, empirical questions can be solved convincingly by empirical studies, and for everybody alike. In my opinion, however, the theory on offer is concrete and elaborate enough to merit serious consideration from now on. The pupils of today are not being well served by stalling tactics. The evidence that is available calls monolingual approaches into question and opens up new paths in teaching methodology and materials production. Hammerly (1991: 151) estimates that the judicious use of the MT in carefully crafted techniques “can be twice as efficient (i.e. reach the same level of second language proficiency in half the time), without any loss in effectiveness, as instruction that ignores the students’ native language.”

We should finally free ourselves of a fundamental misconception and re-establish the more than 2000-year-old productive alliance between the mother tongue and foreign languages – without repeating the mistakes that were made that first time round.

NOTES

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- ¹ It goes without saying that speakers of other nations who teach their native languages abroad also find the monolingual doctrine quite comfortable.
- ² Other reformers before Palmer had made the same distinction (Butzkamm, 1973/1978: 30ff.)
- ³ Compare Gower (1999: 10), who reflects on his own language-learning: “We followed a multi-media course of a type that would be familiar to most EFL teachers, but to my dismay it was devoid of anything approaching a substantial text.”
- ⁴ “Pupils’ reluctance to use target language is a recurring theme in reports from the Office for Standards in Education” (Thomas, 1998: 20).

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NOTES FOR CONTRIBUTORS

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The Editors welcome previously unpublished articles, reports and other contributions which will further the cause of the learning and teaching of languages. These contributions are normally expected to fall into one of the following categories, although contributions of different lengths will also be considered:

- (a) Articles or reports of about 3000 to 5000 words. (Longer pieces may be considered subject to prior consultation with the editors.)
- (b) Shorter articles of up to 1000 words that might include items of information, notes on innovative classroom practice and discussion points (including those arising from previous articles).

An abstract of 200-250 words should accompany articles of 3000 to 5000 words and an abstract of approximately 100 words should accompany those of 1000 words.

Articles should be written in English and may deal with any aspect of FL teaching and learning, FL teacher education, contemporary language, literature and culture. Previously unpublished photocopiable classroom material to accompany the contribution (a worksheet, for example) is particularly welcome.

Presentation

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If you quote references or sources, please give full details using the Harvard system, e.g.: Barber, C. (1993) *The English Language: a historical introduction*. Cambridge: CUP. In the text the author's name, year of publication and page number where relevant should be quoted in brackets, e.g.: (Barber, 1993: 27).

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