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**Native Language Skills as a Foundation for Foreign Language
Learning**

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Le langage comme faculté ne se construit qu'une fois dans une vie humaine.
(DALGALIAN 25)

The Theory in a Nutshell

The allergy to the presence of the mother tongue in the foreign language classroom has undoubtedly come from its all-too-frequent misuse. While it is, therefore, understandable that experts are squeamish about acknowledging the essential, overwhelmingly positive contribution of the mother tongue, their attitude has been a barrier to the true understanding of the issues involved.

It has always been good educational practice to build on a learner's existing skills and competencies. Why should foreign language teaching be an exception? The prevailing monolingual methodology seems to assume that children have to learn everything about the foreign language from scratch. But by the time they start with foreign languages at school, children know a lot about language. As they grow into their mother tongue (1) they have learnt to conceptualize their world and have fully grasped the symbolic function of language; (2) they have learnt to communicate; (3) they have learnt to use their voice and to speak; (4) they have acquired an intuitive understanding of grammar and have become aware of many of the finer points of language; (5) they have acquired the secondary skills of reading and writing. The mother tongue is therefore the greatest asset people bring to the task of foreign language learning and provides an indispensable Language Acquisition Support System.

By contrast, monolingual orthodoxy seems to assume that the mother tongue is nothing but a constant source of interference. Keeping it out of the foreign language

learning business would mean we could more or less start out with something like a blank, structureless slate reserved for foreign languages.

What Early Developments Promote Foreign Language Learning?

1. We are not born speaking, but we are creatures born to learn speaking. One and a half year old children have grasped the essence of language, its symbolic function. They have come to understand their caretakers as well as themselves as intentional, mental agents. Two-year-olds have learnt to use phrases and words as carriers of communicative intent, and can represent their experiences in words. In repetitive, highly structured routine situations that soon became transparent to them, they have learnt to map meanings onto phrases and words, and get thoughts from head to head. Speech sounds are not funny noises to them any more, perhaps they never were.

No child starts a second language with a clean slate. It's already been written on. By the time they come into our classrooms, they have concepts and words for whole arenas of experience, food, clothing, family and playmates, school and holidays, plants and animals, television, hobbies and pastimes, and, last but not least, number. Languages permeate culture, they are distillations of generations of human experience. Take football. All the foreign language teacher has to do is give the new words for well-known concepts such as goal, penalty-kick or offside. Likewise, we quite naturally assume that our pupils already know what words such as "birthday" and "postman" mean within their own culture before they set about explaining the words "anniversaire/Geburtstag" or "facteur/Postbote." 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 re-conceptualise the world, we need to extend our concepts, with any necessary cultural adjustment or refinement.

This is some part of the common ground pupils and teachers share, and which teachers quite naturally use for their monolingual explanations. These wouldn't work if there weren't those common ways of perceiving and conceptualizing the world. It is precisely our common sense knowledge that computers cannot yet cope with and which prevents them from "understanding" simple texts and translating them adequately: ropes

are for pulling and not for pushing, trees die at the very place they grew up at, winds can blow leaves from trees, etc. Conceptually, then, most teaching texts are a well-known landscape, but dressed in the disguise of a new language. This is at least true for all those teaching situations where there are no profound culture clashes or differences in natural environments, the fauna and flora. But even when a kiss means rubbing your nose against somebody's cheek, one simply has to extend a concept which is already familiar.

Wilkins attacks the idea that in learning another language,

part of the task is that of attaching fresh labels to familiar things and ideas. This is as mistaken a notion about vocabulary as it is about syntax, since our classification of the physical and abstract world is itself determined by the lexical structure of the language we speak. If we learn a new language, we have to learn a new way of classifying things. (19)

This is bad linguistics and armchair didactics. Clearly, it's the linguistic determinism hypothesis which is at the back of Wilkins's mind, and which Whorf stated in its strongest form:

We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages [...] the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds – and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. (213)

Different languages do cut up the colour domain differently, and some languages have more basic colour terms than others, some have more words for snow etc. But the fact that a language does or doesn't have a word (or new word-stem) for a colour or a particular kind of snow means little. We cannot enter here into the debate on the relationship of language and thought, tempting as it would be, but claim that this has no bearing on the question whether meaning should be clarified in the native language or in the target language. Let Wilkins explain his idea himself:

A simple example will make the point clear. Russian has one verb, *hodontj*, which means go on foot and another, *jezditj*, which means to travel by vehicle, but no 'neutral' verb like 'go' which can be used for either [...] Neither of these words can be properly understood without knowledge of the meaning of the other. (20f.)

This is a *non sequitur* – the misleading Saussurian tradition that language is a self-contained and self-referential system where words are defined by their relationship to other words. It is simply false to equate language with thought. We believe that children all over the world will have no problems with the concept of going on foot. What's wrong then with explaining "hoditj" as "walk" or "go on foot" and wait till the other verb comes along? The language learning process is always cumulative.

2. From birth on, children are learning how to communicate, first non-verbally, and about a year later, verbally. Entry into language is preceded by entry into communication. Parents play a far more active role than just being an indispensable source of language input. They are first of all partners in communication, trying to make their own intentions clear and interpreting their children's vocalisations as being intentional and meaningful responses, even before they become so. Infants participate and will become themselves intention-readers. They will come to understand how gesture, gaze, facial expressions, voice quality and actual speech sounds can combine to achieve communicative effects. They will learn how to participate in conversations, how to attend to interlocutors and to whatever is being talked about, how to stay on a topic, how to tailor their utterances for each addressee. They will learn when they are expected to respond, what counts as a turn in conversation, and that there is usually more than one way of making oneself understood. They can eavesdrop on other people's conversations and join an ongoing conversation so that the conversation continues on topic. They know that one speaks differently to friends and family members from the way one does to teachers and strangers. They have an idea of politeness and rudeness, and they are busy constructing their social role as a boy versus as a girl partly through language.

Thus learners have acquired an L1 along with its attendant discourse skills and pragmatic knowledge which are directly available for incorporation into the target language system. This is far from saying that as they approach school age, children are skilled conversationalists in their MT. For instance, 10-year-olds use discourse particles such as "in fact," "nevertheless," "although," "on the other hand," which serve to take

the listener's knowledge and perspective into account, three times more often than 6-year-olds but still much less often than adults (TOMASELLO 269). Relating past events and story-telling are complex discourse skills that take long to develop, continue into the school years and beyond and can be turned into an art-form. Although the foundations have been laid, and 6-year-olds evidence practically adult-level linguistic skills in many respects, there is much left for school to do.

3. To some extent, we are born communicators, but we must certainly learn how to speak. Children have to practise becoming vocalizers and speakers.

Fluent articulation is probably man's most complex motor skill. It involves the coordinated use of approximately 100 muscles, such that speech sounds are produced at a rate of about 15 per second. (LEVELT 413)

It comes as no surprise that during all of childhood, children are at work on becoming better articulators.

When babies lie in their crib and play with sounds as they coo and babble, they are likely to create "a kind of mouth-to-sound map, relating the movements of their speech articulators (their lips, tongue, mouth and jaw) to the sounds they produce" (GOPNIK et al. 124). They also learn something akin to lip-reading, as they watch their mothers bending over them and speaking to them, just at the right distance for the baby's not fully developed sight. Sometimes they get especially well-formed, exaggerated and lengthened vowels from their parents:

When mothers say the word bead to an adult, it's produced in a fraction of a second and it's a bit sloppy. But when mothers say that same word to their infants, it becomes beeed, a well-produced, clearly articulated word. (GOPNIK et al. 130)

Of course, parents are not consciously teaching vowels. Extraordinarily good vowels are just part of their high-pitched melodic singsong which is an expression of their love, and which they intuitively think makes them attractive to their baby and would endear them to him. For them, it is simply a way of showing their affection and giving comfort. But

for the baby, it could be a great help in identifying the prototypical main vowels. Out of context, motherese simply sounds silly. All this has been clearly demonstrated beyond doubt by a spate of ingenious experiments carried out in the last few decades. For instance, tests have shown that babies prefer motherese over ordinary language even when the speaker is talking in a foreign language. Or they have shown that they prefer to look at the face of a person mouthing a vowel that matches the one they are listening to, rather than looking at a face mouthing a different vowel that doesn't match. Just as babies are programmed for language, adults are designed to help babies learn: "genetische Doppelsicherung der Sprache" (BUTZKAMM & BUTZKAMM 106).

So children gradually and continually add more and more information about sound production. They start out slowly with only a few mutilated, yet recognizable words. They learn how to master the contrasts between high and low, front and back vowels, between stops and fricatives, voiced and voiceless consonants etc. The continuous experimentation and practice with the sounds of words takes time. Late acquired sounds such as the "hushing" and "hissing" sounds are clearly more difficult than those acquired early.

At some point there is a characteristic mismatch between what children perceive as correct and what they can produce. This is often referred to as the "fis phenomenon":

One of us, for instance, spoke to a child who called his inflated plastic fish a fis. In imitation of the child's pronunciation, the observer said: "This is your fis?" "No," said the child, "my fis." He continued to reject the adult's pronunciation until he was told, "This is your fish." "Yes," he said, "my fis." (BERKO & BROWN 531).

So the child is clearly aware of the contrast which it can't yet produce himself, and rejects his own pronunciation when it comes from someone else. This fact was already observed and commented upon by Stern & Stern (165). Perception is in advance of articulation. The fine motor movements required for speech production take a great deal of practice. That's probably the reason why babbling continues well after the appearance of the first few words.

Father: Say "jump."
Child: Dup.

Father: No, "jump."

Child: Dup.

Father: No, "jummp."

Child: Only Daddy can say dup! (CLARK 72)

This need not be elaborated further. All parents have observed how much time and effort it takes the children to articulate the speech sounds clearly and correctly, and have often worried about persistent difficulties their children had with individual sounds or sound combinations. They expect their child to master all the MT sounds by the time they go to school.

A fully developed speech organ involving the coordination of so many muscles is an invaluable help when we tackle a new language. There is, however, some language growth which, from a foreign language perspective, is a loss, and where in fact the mother tongue turns out to be a hindrance for second language learners, instead of a help. As children slowly succeed in articulating one sound sequence after another, one would expect them, in a parallel development, to discriminate more and more sound contrasts. In fact, the opposite is the case. As listeners, infants start out ready for any language, but then reorganize their phonetic perception from "universal" to language-specific. As they tune in to the sounds of their first language, they show a decline in sensitivity to sound distinctions used in languages that are not their own. For instance, Japanese and American seven-months-olds can discriminate /r/ from /l/ equally well. But one-year-old Japanese infants (and adults) have practically lost the ability to distinguish between "ra" and "la", whereas the American babies not only continued to hear the changes from /r/ to /l/, but even got better at making this distinction (GOPNIK et al. 107). On the other hand, one-year old English-speaking infants can no longer discriminate the /u/ and /y/ vowels. I asked Gisa, a 3-year-old German girl, to sing along "This old man, he played one [...]" and to join us in "Sur le pont d'Avignon [...]" and we heard the accent typical of a German native speaker. She substituted German "wann" for "one", "sur" became /zyr/ instead of /syr/, etc. As if she transformed the actual sounds she heard into sounds closer to the mother tongue sounds. "By six to twelve months of age, the baby is no longer a citizen of the world but a culture-bound language specialist, like you and me." (GOPNIK et al. 123). It is at the level of sounds that the native language most distinctly intrudes on the learner's foreign languages. This, indeed,

can make life miserable to FL learners, and most of us will never get rid of their accents. The mental representations of speech sounds we have established during childhood interfere with the representations required by the foreign language. So learners have to develop new auditory habits, but the articulatory gains we have made in and through mother tongue far outweigh these perceptual losses.

4. Foreign language teachers often complain that their pupils have "no grammar." They find that whenever they mention categories like adjectives, passives or relative clauses, they are like a sealed book to them. Their criticism is levelled against their colleagues who teach the mother tongue and have obviously not taught those terms.

But adjectives etc. are only profound mysteries to the pupils in the sense that they cannot define them adequately. Given a few mother tongue examples, they might correctly list many more adjectives. Most important of all: when they speak, they obviously know what to do with adjectives in a sentence and how to put them to good use to understand and express themselves. If you can make intelligent use of your computer, it's really all you need. Who cares if you can define it? Categories such as adjectives live in the minds of school children, whether they can define them properly or not.

Similarly, speakers of many native tongues can handle inflections and know that an ending like -ing or -ed can do different jobs in a sentence. They can easily be made aware of the fact that there are constraints on word order, and that most words have more than one meaning, because polysemy is ubiquitous.

The processes of linguistic analysis, the nature of sound-symbol relationship, the very nature of language itself, are the same for the foreign language. This book is thus based on the belief that there is a connection between English and any foreign language. It is, as a matter of fact, an attempt to establish or re-establish the connection between English and foreign language learning, which has often been lost sight of in the development of recent foreign language courses and curricula. (POLITZER vi)

Note, however, that the path-breaking power of L1 grammar is not dependent on the fact that target language and the mother tongue share a grammatical feature such as the pluperfect tense or relative clauses (most of the world's languages don't have them). It is of course easy to see that if both languages do have the pluperfect tense or relative

clauses in common, they need not be taught from scratch, i.e. the teaching can focus on the formal coding rather than the function. But it is because all languages have evolved means of expressing abstract ideas such as agent, number, possession, conditions, obligation etc., no matter how they do this, that one natural language is enough to open the door for the grammars of other languages. For instance, modern Greek uses a that-clause where English uses an infinitive: "You must go now" is in Greek *"you must that you go now," or "I want to sleep" is *"I want that I sleep." The constructions don't agree, but our mother tongue provides us with the means of understanding the foreign mode of expression. Even if there is no "if" in a language, that language can express conditions and thus clarify the function of "if" in those languages that have such a conjunction.

In German and English we can express obligation and permission by using modal verbs. Not so in Korean, which has to operate with preceding conditional clauses – rather complicated from our point of view:

"You must read this book." Korean: "If you don't read this book, it is not OK."
"You needn't read this book." Korean: "Even if you don't read the book, it is OK."
(after GIVÓN 338)

We always find mother tongue approximations of the original which can be used for the time being to gain access to the text and ensure an initial understanding. Searle's (19) principle of expressibility applies: "Whatever can be meant, can be said;" by extension, whatever can be said, can be translated. In FL classrooms, meaning-conveyance via the native tongue can be 100% successful, even though some niceties of rhythm and register may be missing.

Children realize – or can easily be made to realize – that there is no single match of form and function. By the time they encounter a foreign language at school, it will not surprise them that a foreign phrase can have several valid translations. Learners have also come to understand some of the finer points of language use: idiomatic phrases, figurative speech, metaphors and irony. For instance, we can distinguish between core meaning (prototypical meaning) and non-core meanings of words, and, correspondingly, develop intuitions regarding the potential transferability of meanings between languages.

Core meanings may function as a springboard. "Eye," "oeil," "Auge" are useful equivalents, although there is a host of collocations and idioms where "eye" cannot be rendered by "oeil" or "Auge". The wide spectrum of meaning of such words can only be developed gradually. A monolingual demonstration "These are my eyes, this is my left eye, and this is my right eye" would be just as "wrong" as the translation, i.e. incomplete, and could lead to the same mistakes. "Unter vier Augen" is not *"under four eyes", but "in strict confidence;" "vor aller Augen" is "openly" or "publicly," "aus den Augen verlieren" is "lose sight of" and not *"lose out of the eyes." Only with growing competence will learners acquire a feel for the extension and transferability of core meanings. Good language learners tend to avoid transferring non-core meanings. Errors, of course, are inevitable.

In fact, "a generalized capacity to process syntax" is postulated which helps the acquisition of a native, as well as a foreign language, according to Skehan (33). The ability to learn foreign languages easily can, therefore, be predicted by looking at the mother tongue. Ganschow & Sparks 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 foreign language learning" (87). For a century, a large part of the language teaching profession has ignored the very foundations on which foreign language learning is built.

5. Arabic script moves from right to left, from back page to front. Chinese characters normally follow one another without breaks to indicate individual words. By contrast, young European learners learn early in their schooling that writing flows from left to write, and the flow of speech can be broken into words which are spaced on the page. In whatever language, however, the concept of linearity is there. Learners with alphabetical mother tongues are aware of complex phoneme-grapheme relationships. Moreover, the motor skills for writing have been established long before another school language is introduced. Native language literacy skills are transferred to the foreign language.

To sum up. All these knowledge sources are available at the foreign language initial state. It has taken children years to obtain them, all of childhood. What children can do

with words by the time foreign language teaching starts, and how many way stations there are along the road to language, all this is as yet hardly dreamt of in our teaching philosophy. However, the many challenging engineering problems that we humans solve as we speak and use language are more and more coming to light (CLARK; TOMASELLO).

When we encounter a foreign language, our minds will make a great many assumptions so deeply embedded in the operation of our language brain that we cannot erase them. If we did not see the new language through the lens of those assumptions, it would not be a blessing, but a catastrophe. Years of mother tongue input and interactions have altered our brains and shaped our minds in ways that are overwhelmingly helpful for the acquisition of new languages. It makes excellent biological sense for a new language to piggy-back onto this open channel of communication. The MT is a richly furnished base camp from which we all set out to conquer new language territories.

The complexity of the skills a talking child brings to the classroom have been grossly underrated by the teaching profession. Most of it seems to have come about so effortlessly and instinctively that we are quite unaware even of the sheer amount of the learning load. Teachers, in general, have not pondered just how much young children know, and how infants got from knowing nothing to knowing so much. As they observe their students lapsing into their mother tongue and happily chatting away during group work, many must have sighed: If only they could ignore it for a while ... However, the learners would use it less where it distracts from the foreign language, if only the teacher knew how to use it better.

Experimental Evidence

Word recognition experiments carried out by the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen (GOEBEL 2003) have provided incontrovertible evidence for the underlying presence of the MT. Competition between candidate words in the mental lexicon is the core assumption of most models of spoken word recognition.

Candidate words are those which start with identical sound sequences. Since the number of such possible word candidates is much smaller in a FL as yet imperfectly mastered, one would think that word recognition would be faster – provided that the theoretical model were correct. However, it turned out that listeners, unconsciously, of course, and involuntarily, also activated native language words. Dutch listeners apparently could not avoid considering native-language word candidates for recognition of a non-native word, even though they followed instructions in English and expected English words. Native word candidates popped up on their mental screen, as it were, however so briefly, before being deactivated. As Anne Cutler's experiments in Nijmegen have shown, the direct method is a misnomer. (www.mpi.nl/Members/AnneCutler) For the beginner, there is no direct association between picture and FL word because the L1 word cannot be bypassed. This has often been pointed out by practising teachers. Show a picture of a pear, and the learner will say to himself: "Aha, 'pear' is 'Birne'." The picture is not more "direct" than the MT word.

Classroom Observations and Reflections

Ever since the direct method was invented towards the end of the nineteenth century, critics have maintained that the direct principle is a delusion. Teaching monolingually without the help of the mother tongue is of course possible; however, monolingual learning is an intrinsic impossibility. We all take what we already know and use this as a basis to learn more. 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.

Some have argued that just because the mother tongue is so deeply entrenched in our mental lives and inner consciousness, it's the Enemy No 1 which foreign language teachers have to combat. The teacher faces "the difficulty of overcoming the barrier of the pupils' mother tongue. For the mother tongue acts as a block in all the learners' language reactions, and impedes the learning of the new language because it is so firmly seated as the first language" (GURREY 3). A barrier and a block? Only at first sight. The

opposite, of course, is true: not only MT and FL, but all the child's varied languages experiences must and do interact and inform each other.

Just as we build upon our ability to vocalise, read and to write, so we are unable to switch off our knowledge of the world. We have associations, whether we want them or not. They just happen to us. So "ignoring or forbidding English will not do, for learners inevitably engage in French-English associations and formulations in their minds" (HAMMERLY 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 351). Ever since the days of Sweet and Palmer, the irrepressibility of associations in the MT has been regularly confirmed as a sad, but unavoidable, 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." The MT as an evil, albeit a necessity. 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 – whether the teacher openly supports these processes or not. Felt needs bring forth their own solutions. 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 who uses it along with environmental "scaffolding" in the context of L1 acquisition. In foreign language learning, the LASS is mainly provided by the mother tongue, with learners engaging in their own self-scaffolding. Our job is to assist them in this task and, among other things, use the MT as a rapid conduit to meaning instead of ignoring or even trying to suppress what goes on in the pupils' minds.

Brooks (142) assumes we could guide the learner along the right linguistic path "by rendering English inactive while the new language is being learned." Any classroom approach based on such a philosophy would be at once impossible, impractical and

fundamentally flawed. There is no choice: We all see the new in terms of the familiar. If we didn't, we wouldn't understand.

The Way Ahead

Leading German textbooks have bilingual grammar and vocabulary sections. 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 English-language textbooks are widespread, that pupils truly suffer.

We must discard the way issues about the mother tongue have been framed for more than a century, namely that it is only a matter of meaning-conveyance, and that meaning-conveyance is only a matter of unknown words. Against such a reduced view, I want to advance a rich understanding of the role of the mother tongue because its targeted and calculated use has repercussions on many other aspects of teaching, such as communication, content and quality of texts used, and grammar. The prevailing orthodoxy has to be overturned and foreign language teaching put solidly back on its feet. Foreign languages piggyback on L1. Teen-age learners have accumulated an immense charge and reservoir of semantic and grammatical meanings which must be released and transferred to the target language. If they didn't intuitively mediate their learning of L2 through their mother tongue, foreign language teaching would be a hopeless undertaking. Mother tongue support is thus an absolute necessity for the foreign language learner, and well-devised, provably effective bilingual techniques should be central techniques that all teachers should learn to master. They will benefit all learners, but will especially help low-performing students, those with disabilities or risk factors. Framing the issue in such a way that foreign language is best when it is mother-tongue-free (whatever that means) is a colossal mistake.

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