

**Progressing from imitative to  
creative exercises  
A presentation of the bilingual  
method**

*The British Journal of  
Language Teaching*  
21, 1 (1983)

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The authors of this article present here their current organization of the techniques of the bilingual method (Dodson 1967), using protocols of typical classroom interactions. The bilingual method has sometimes been misrepresented as a "translation method" or as "bilingual drill". Such labels might have prevented teachers from familiarizing themselves with the method. We can show, however, that although translation and drill are involved, the method fits very well within a modern communicative approach.

**How it functions**

In the bilingual method a lesson cycle (2-4 lessons) starts with the presentation of a basic dialogue containing the new learning material and ends up with groups of learners acting out their own dialogues and discussing them with the rest of the class. The method is characterized by this overall movement from an input text presented by teacher/textbook to several learner-produced output texts.

The aim is, then, to lead the learners from understanding new words, structures and routine phrases to using them creatively in their own texts and, finally, for their own communicative needs.

Consider the following texts — the first two, Examples A and B, are input texts; the next two, Examples A' and B', are learner-produced output texts by German students of English. The first text, Example A, is from cartoons in the Peanuts series by Charles Schulz:

*Example A:*

Lucy: TV! TV! TV!

Lucy: All you ever do lately is sit and watch TV!!

Linus: I beg your pardon . . .

I am not watching TV . . .

Linus: I am engaged in creative viewing!

The second, Example B, is a dialogue generated by the teacher of an eighth grade class (3½ years of English) in the Federal Republic of Germany.

*Example B:*

"Who will win the elections"

1. A. Who do you think will win the next elections?
2. B. If you ask me, the Christian Democrats will get in.
3. A. But in my opinion they won't win easily.
4. B. I don't agree. Everybody thinks
5. it's time for a change.
6. A. But don't you realize that Strauß is not very popular with the workers?
7. B. I don't see what you are getting at.

Every input text is the point of departure for several output texts. We only present two typical student-written output texts corresponding to the teacher-supplied input texts above. First, Example A', written by a small group of students:

*Example A':*

Football or homework?

Mother: Football, football, football!

All you ever do lately is go out and play football.

Tom: Why not?

Mother: Don't you think you've got anything else to do?

Tom: Like what?

Mother: Like homework!

Tom: Oh, good grief!

And now, Example B', an original version by a student group as performed for the class:

**Example B':**  
**"Best Teacher"**

- (Students begin the role-play)
- Sabine: Who do you think is the best teacher at our school?
- Maria: Em, if you ask me I think Mr. X is the / /
- Ss: (interruptions) Oh, hmm . . .
- Sabine: But in my opinion he isn't that good.
- Maria: Em, I don't agree. Everybody thinks he's a very intelligent person.
- Sabine: But don't / /
- Ss: (interrupt the dialogue, a few whistle)
- Sabine: But don't you realize that Mr. X isn't very pop / popular with his / with his students?
- Maria: I don't see what you are getting at.  
(End of the play.)

Let us pause briefly to consider whether the aim of foreign language teaching, namely to function in relevant communicative situations, has been achieved. The learners are supposed to have composed similar texts with reference to the input text as well as on the basis of previously acquired knowledge. Each group presents its own text in front of the class, acting as naturally as possible, speaking the parts without using a script, using a native-like intonation as well as the appropriate gestures and mimes. This, we believe, can indeed be accepted as an instance of the target behaviour that should be the goal of foreign language teaching. The one thing which is conspicuously missing here, namely spontaneous speech, is provided by the ensuing discussion of the playlet with the rest of the class. At the very beginning of the course, there can be virtually no discussion, or only controlled discussion, simply because very little that the listener might want to say, to question and to criticize can be expressed in terms of the language he already knows. At the point where such cartoons or flashcards can be handled well by the class, however, comments and questions will usually arise. A speaker might, for instance, make use of the input phrase: Who do you think will win the game tonight? And he might receive answers like: Who do you think will win? If we accept, then, that this constitutes the

desired terminal behaviour, the question arises how to get students from receiving new material in a basic dialogue to functioning in such target activities.

The answer is the following series of steps known as the bilingual method. Our contention is that the bilingual method is a fast, elegant way of leading the learners from an initial text, and knowing nothing about certain words and structures of that text, to using them freely and creatively in their own texts. Not one of the many techniques here employed may be new after "25 centuries of language teaching"; yet the interlocking of these techniques, their place and function within this framework, amounts to a genuinely new and distinct foreign language teaching method. The steps may conveniently be ordered according to the familiar three phase scheme:

Phase 1: Presentation

Phase 2: From syntactic to semantic manipulation

Phase 3: Original role-play

Following is an outline and discussion of the techniques of the Bilingual Method in each Phase and their organization.

**Phase 1: Presentation**

The aim of the first phase, Presentation, is for the students to act out the text in front of the class without the aid of the script, in as natural a manner as possible. It contains eight steps:

- Step 1. Familiarizing Questions
- Step 2. Dialogue Presentation
- Step 3. Imitation
- Step 4. Comprehension
- Step 5. Interpretation
- Step 6. Picture Recognition
- Step 7. Free Recall
- Step 8. Presentation

We begin with two steps in which the students only look at the picture-strip or flashcards; the text is not visible to the students.

*Step 1 — Familiarizing Questions.* A few questions are asked in order to familiarize the students with the pictures (approximately 1 minute). Examples: How many persons can you see? Do you know this person? (Picture of Strauß) No attempt is made at this stage to point out elements which involve the new learning material.

*Step 2 — Dialogue Presentation.* The dialogue is read to the class with much animation. Even better, if available, a

taped version (each part spoken by a native speaker, background noises) is played to the class (15 seconds). The students now have an idea of the learning task ahead of them.

*Step 3 — Imitation.* This is the main imitation step. Now pictures and text are available to the student. The procedure is as follows (5-10 minutes):

Teacher or Tape: Charlie Brown, will you make me a sandwich?

Teacher: Charlie Brown, machst du mir ein Butterbrot?

Teacher (not on tape!): Charlie Brown, will you make me a sandwich?

Student 1: Charlie Brown, will you make me a sandwich?

Student 2: Charlie Brown, will you make me a sandwich?

...

In this step we can follow well-established mim-mem routines, with two notable exceptions: the availability of the printed word and the mother tongue translation. At this point we will not go into a theoretical discussion. (See: Butzkamm 1980). Instead, we will try to describe the techniques used as accurately as possible. Only these precise techniques — not just similar ones — have been proven significantly superior to dialogue practice without the use of translation and the printed word. The problem here boils down to the ways and means of how to minimize negative transfer, and at the same time maximize transfer from the script and the translation.

#### *The simultaneous reading technique*

The very first dialogue is introduced both orally and in its written form. Interference is reduced to a minimum if the students are told beforehand always to make the oral cue the primary stimulus for their response. If they want to, they may glance at the script when somebody else is called upon to speak or when they are repeating the sentence to themselves and can rely on an auditory image of the sentence. They should be aware of the incomplete phonetic fit between sound and script. The students can be instructed in very simple terms: "Always imitate what you hear; never read aloud while looking at the text".

#### *Meaning conveyance through the mother tongue*

As we can well see, in the imitation step interference is practically eliminated through the fact that the mother tongue

equivalent is sandwiched between two foreign language cues. It is the contiguity between the second foreign language stimulus and the imitation response which prevents interference. Apart from this, the process of semanticizing follows several other principles:

- Utterance equivalents, not word equivalents are given.
- Foremost is a functional translation that renders the communicative value and pragmatic intent of the utterance as closely as possible.
- Multiple translation: in many cases, not just one, but several equivalent translations are given, thus focusing the semantic range.
- A literal translation can sometimes be given in addition to the functional equivalent to demonstrate syntactic and lexical contrasts.
- The principle of making the foreign structure transparent by imitating it in the mother tongue can be carried even further. We can model the foreign syntax onto the mother tongue sentence even where the latter becomes ungrammatical (but is still perfectly intelligible to the native speaker).

*Step 4 — Comprehension.* After ten minutes of intensive repetition practice, the students need a break. We can now insert an optional comprehension step. The students can listen to the text again, but need not speak it. The following variations are possible:

The teacher plays the taped version, while the students read the text silently, with encouragement to imagine the setting.

The same as above, but the students can only listen, because the text is covered.

The teacher speaks the sentences in a random order. The pictures, but not the text are available. The students name the picture number corresponding to each sentence.

The same as above, but neither pictures nor text are available.

The students name the number and the person who makes the utterance:

Teacher: Who do you think will win the next elections?

Student: Number 1, Ann.

*Step 5 — Interpretation.* The teacher gives a mother tongue stimulus, and the student responds with the foreign language sentence (2-4 minutes):

Teacher: Wer wird deiner Meinung nach die nächste Wahl gewinnen?

Student: Who do you think will win the next elections?

This is a major step, necessary to firmly weld the sentence meaning to the sounds and "to transform the students' mere awareness of meaning into a strong association between meaning and sounds" (Dodson 1967, 85). Dodson found that concentration on the imitation activity of Step 3 tends to "blank out and prevent the consolidation of the meaning" (p. 87), a phenomenon related to the process of "verbal satiation" observed in laboratory experiments, in which the meanings of the words drain away during successive repetitions.

That is why, in spite of the intervening comprehension steps, in which the students associated the sentences with the pictures and the persons, this "interpretation step" was found necessary. How is interference eliminated, now that the foreign language response immediately follows the mother tongue stimulus? Mainly through cognitive awareness. The students know that they are not supposed to translate, i.e. to construct their response along the lines of the mother tongue stimulus. What is elicited is recall; in other words they are expected to remember, not to translate. The student hears the mother tongue sentence, recognizes the previously practised foreign language sentence and tries to recall it. If he does not recall it promptly and entirely, the teacher helps out immediately by giving the full FL sentence, and can thus prevent the student from guessing and translating.

The procedure of this step can be varied in important ways. If the teacher is uncertain whether the students can correctly recall the sentences, he allows them to look at the printed text.

*Step 6 — Picture Recognition.* Another quick run-through of the text can be effected with the aid of the pictures only. If the pictures are on handouts, the teacher calls out the picture number, and the students speak the corresponding sentences. With the pictures on flashcards, there will be much more flexibility in this procedure.

*Step 7 — Free Recall.* Control step: uncued free recall. Text and pictures are not available. The students are invited to say any of the practised sentences that come to their minds. They can be asked to keep silent for 2 minutes while going over the sentences in their minds. This is not an empty and embarrassing silence, because intense mental activity is going on.

This step constitutes an interesting test for the teacher. If he sees that none of the students recalls a particular sentence, this can be taken as a sure sign that something went wrong in the previous steps. There is still time to remedy this and practise this sentence with a few additional imitation and interpretation contacts.

*Step 8 — Presentation.* The class splits up in groups according to the number of parts in the dialogue. They rehearse the dialogue until they are ready to act it out in front of the class.

On no account should this final step, the Target Step, be left out. The students can now relax and determine the learning pace themselves. They are no longer desk-bound, but allowed to move freely in the classroom. So does the teacher who listens in on the groups practising and now has special time to give the weaker student short "private" lessons if he feels the student wants this help.

Acting out a dialogue is quite a different achievement from merely saying the sentences. This can easily be observed. Students who are perfectly capable of speaking the sentences without the text and pictures as in the control step 7, are not yet ready to perform in a play, i.e. to speak the same sentences in talking to a partner and negotiating something with him. If they try to do this without previous rehearsing in the group, then faulty diction, hesitation and mother tongue intonation will creep in.

Acting out a scene is the hallmark of true automatization of the lower levels of language: phonological, morphological, syntactical and lexical constraints.

The teacher who stops short before the performance of the dialogues is spoiling the ship for a halfpenny worth of tar.

## **Phase 2: From syntactic to semantic manipulation**

The aim throughout the manipulation exercises is "to get the pupils away from

the fixed sentences of the basic situation and to train them to form new combinations of sentence elements and clauses" (Dodson 1967, 110). We exploit the generative character of language by using sentence frames from the original dialogue to produce many new sentences. This is, to a degree, in accordance with traditional pattern practice. The familiar aim is the automatization of a structure not only as it occurred literally in the basic dialogue but also with morphological changes and lexical variations. In Phase 2 the individual teacher encourages the students to expand new structures and vocabulary by introducing a series of varied teacher-developed activities and additional related lexical items. The aim here is also to bridge the gap between medium-orientated communication where the focus is on the language to message-orientated communication where the focus is on the things one wants to achieve by using language. Because of this double aim the manipulation stage of the bilingual method is fundamentally different from what is normally understood by pattern practice.

Within this phase there is an important shift from syntactic manipulation to semantic manipulation. At the very beginning of drill with an exercise in Phase 2, when the students perhaps do not feel safe with a structure, the variations might be rather mechanical, involving changes of person, number, gender and easily foreseeable lexical substitutions and extensions:

- Will you make me a sandwich?
- Will you make him a sandwich?
- Will you make him two sandwiches?
- Will you make him an egg sandwich?
- Will you make us an egg and tomato sandwich?
- Will you make us a tomato soup?
- Etc.

In this well-known type of pattern practice the cues in the audio-lingual approach are usually in the foreign language. In the bilingual method, however, the teacher's stimulus is the complete mother tongue sentence:

- Machst du mir ein Butterbrot?
- Machst du ihm ein Butterbrot?
- Machst du ihm zwei Butterbrote?
- Etc.

This technique has two advantages:

- (1) the student is continually aware of the full semantic and pragmatic content of

what he is going to say, (2) the student gets an opportunity to review his vocabulary. He has to make an effort at retrieving the word from his word-store, instead of merely repeating it.

Krashen (1980, 197) proposes that an emphasis on vocabulary can lead to the learner's acquisition of syntax. Thus vocabulary, far from being a mere stopgap necessary to avoid monotony, becomes of utmost linguistic importance. The idea is to find — through lexical variations — the meaningful situations that can be verbalized by the aid of the structure, especially those situations that might be personally relevant to the learners:

stimulus: In der letzten Zeit tut Tom nichts als schlafen, schlafen, schlafen.

response: All Tom ever does lately is sleep, sleep, sleep.

stimulus: In der letzten Zeit tut Tim nichts als Fußball spielen.

response: All Tim ever does lately is play football.

stimulus: In der letzten Zeit schreit unser Lehrer uns nur noch an.

response: All our teacher ever does lately is shout at us.

The exercise must now become monolingual and be turned over to the students who make their own sentences. The focus has shifted from teaching the manipulation of grammatical structures (keeping variety of vocabulary to a minimum) to teaching the semantic range of a given structure where vocabulary is all important. Thus the phrase "All you ever do lately is sit and watch TV" is no longer viewed as a particular pattern to be practised, but as a means of making complaints. The teacher could hand over the exercise to the students by asking them to find complaints typical of certain jobs:

Teacher: All I ever do lately is sit and correct essays.

Mother: All I ever do lately is prepare meals.

This can be turned into a guessing game. The rest of the class must find out which job the producer of a sentence has in mind:

All I ever do (lately) is punch holes into tickets.

All I ever do (lately) is clean cages and feed animals.

The success of such an undirected, free

activity where the students are busy inventing their own sentences, very much depends upon the previous teacher-directed drill. It is the teacher's task to reflect upon the semantic potential of a given structure and relate it to what is topical and in some way relevant to his class. He can ask students to keep silent for a few minutes, to reflect upon the sentences they have just heard and jot down a few notes for their own sentences.

Though in this phase the students may still produce substantial amounts of 'drill speech', the shift from form-orientated to content-orientated work is a step closer to 'real speech'. The same holds true for the transition from teacher-controlled mother tongue stimuli to uncued foreign language work. These shifts set the stage for phase 3.

### **Phase 3: Original Role-Play**

The student now has the skills necessary to create new combinations within the framework of the basic text. Both oral and written work in Phases 1 and 2 lead to the students' preparedness for Phase 3 — writing, presenting, and discussing original role-plays. Phase 3 concludes with the attainment of the original goal of communicative competence and performance, which gradually increase in quality and quantity.

Phase 3 also falls into a well-ordered but flexible pattern of activities:

- Step 1 Writing variations. The class divides into small groups; each group writes a variation of the basic text; the teacher assists the groups as needed.
- Step 2 Text correction. The teacher reads and corrects the students' versions.
- Step 3 Group practice. Each group practices its text after the teacher has seen and corrected it.
- Step 4 Production. Each group acts out its version for the class; the teacher refrains from commenting except in cases of demonstrated need for assistance and to offer praise or encouragement.
- Step 5 Commentary. The class comments on the production and discusses it with the actors; the teacher assists and guides the discussion.

#### *Step 1 — Writing Variations*

As one can see in the student versions of the dialogues above, most of the original

text has been retained, but the focus of the students' version has shifted dramatically. The students' versions are parallel situations that relate closely to their setting; politics amongst the students is sometimes a matter of supporting certain teachers' popularity or not. The syntactic structures and frame sentences remain largely unchanged.

#### *Step 2 — Correction*

With versions that have the brevity of "Best Teacher", the teacher can make corrections in class as the secretaries bring the groups' new versions to him or her. In later stages of the course, the length of the productions may preclude immediate correction, necessitating overnight correction. In any case the teacher should take the time that is required to make careful changes in a too complex or inadequate text.

#### *Step 3 — Group Practice*

In the example dialogues above, line 6 in the original: "But don't you realize that Strauß is not very popular with the workers?" leads to simple substitutions in line 9 in the variation: "But don't you realize that Mr. X isn't very pop / popular with his / with his students?" However, both versions are quite long — over fifteen syllables in each. For this reason, perhaps, the student stumbles twice trying to get through it. The class may have needed more drill on this sentence in Phase 2 or the small group may have needed more time for practice.

#### *Step 4 — Production*

It is important to maintain the students' sense of accomplishment when they are "on stage". Sufficient time to rehearse after their version has been corrected will encourage adequate productions and free the teacher to play a supporting role during the productions rather than a correcting role. As is evident in the example above, students readily become involved in their peers' presentations of original versions of the basic text.

#### *Step 5 — Commentary*

In order to activate a spontaneous use of the foreign language, and, at the same time, to give the performers some feedback other than interruption and applause, the final step provides for discussion of the performance and/or discussion of the content.

The discussion of a presentation again

challenges the students' abilities to express themselves without external assistance or controls. We suggest that the teacher create a supportive atmosphere for the students by following a gradually more demanding approach to this step, gradually moving from the teacher's model commentary to mostly student commentary.

### Conclusion

The authors' three phase organization of the techniques of the bilingual method assures that the students' present skills and need for careful progression will be met with a flexible procedure. The teacher can readily fall back to an earlier phase or step when necessary to assist a learner.

During the early steps in each phase, when the foreign language skills are not yet up to the task of independent communication, the mother tongue is called upon to elicit responses. However, the foreign language soon becomes the means of communication within the bounds of the current lesson.

This seems to be the crux of the matter. We believe that the insistence on the creative use of language where language is a tool rather than an end in itself is at the heart of the success of the bilingual method

in many classrooms. This method makes sure that message-orientated communication does take place without ignoring the learners' need for structural simplification and orderly progression of techniques.

### Footnote

<sup>1</sup>For reasons of copyright restrictions the pictures cannot be included. We do, however, use the original drawings in class and make original drawings for our own dialogues.

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