

The Bilingual Reform: A Paradigm Shift in Foreign Language Teaching Wolfgang Butzkamm and John A. W. Caldwell. narr studienbücher (2009)

With this book, change has indeed come in foreign language teaching. Wolfgang Butzkamm and John Caldwell have added a teacher-friendly book that constructs praxis by examining practical classroom strategies as well as illuminating relevant theories in second or foreign language teaching. Already in the introduction the authors' attachment to critical pedagogy, student-centred learning and the advocacy of an eclectic approach to foreign and second language teaching is evident. Each of the fourteen chapters in the book contributes to form a comprehensive unit with a vast array of practical techniques that can be effectively employed in the teaching of another language. Verbatim citations of comments made by students and teachers alike add an extra dimension, illustrating relevance thorough personal observations, and providing accessibility to the theoretical stance taken. The narrative-like quality of the writing style transforms this book from an instruction manual on foreign language teaching to text which can be enjoyed even as extensive reading.

In chapter one the pre-eminent role of foreign language input and interaction is reaffirmed; however, the authors reassure the foreign language teacher of the complementary role of the mother tongue in message-orientated discourse. Important issues that are addressed are immersion, the critical mass hypothesis, the undesired side-effects of monolingualism, and medium-oriented and message oriented communication. Throughout the presentation of the theoretical aspects addressed in this chapter the authors have sandwiched in many practical guidelines not only for the beginner teacher; the chapter also consolidates the accumulated experiences of the seasoned foreign language teacher.

Chapters two and three continue with an explanation of the principle of dual comprehension – what is meant and what is literally said – and how children “crack the code.” The authors present a fresh look at past solutions and convincingly illustrate some of their arguments in favour of mother tongue use in foreign language teaching when they probe the soundness and relevance of objections frequently made against such use. Although it is often argued that foreign language teachers and learners should break away from the habit of “mental translation”, Butzkamm and Caldwell suggest that it is a lopsided argument since in bilingual brains “a common neural system mediates semantic processes for both languages.“ The links between concepts and the mother tongue should therefore not be severed because for many phrases, only a clarification in the mother tongue can bring pupils to trust in a foreign language expression. Consequently, effective input is only possible through the “abundant, meaningful and timely use of the foreign language, and not by avoiding the MT on principle.”

When discussing the communicative equivalent and cross-linguistic networks in chapter four the authors advocate that since MT approximations can always be found, and used, to gain access to the teaching text it will ensure an initial understanding; however, whatever the teacher does to make pupils understand, the wide spectrum of meanings can only be developed gradually. When single words are explained, bilingually or monolingually, the second or foreign language learners are deprived of the pragmatic dimension. In ‘deforeignising’ the foreign language, the MT with its syn

chronous paralinguistics proves to be the most “supple, flexible instrument for conveying meaning in its full force.”

The MT is consequently the magic key to foreign grammars. In chapter five the reader is provided with clear explanations and technicalities as well as instances where language learners have been more harmed than helped by harrowing experiences in grammar teaching. This chapter additionally provides the reader with creative and innovative ways, such as MT mirroring, in which the grammar of a foreign language could be made more accessible to foreign language learners.

Chapter six continues with examples of how to teach language structures the bilingual way. The theoretical background of the generative principle and natural language acquisition forms the basis for the implementation of semi-communicative drills such as presentation and clarification, easy substitution, pair work leading to pupil presentation and communicative interludes. Objectives to this kind of drilling are overruled when the authors share their own extensive evidence from classroom experiences and research findings with the reader. Chapter seven continues with ideas for the teacher of how to approach practising of the foreign language through dialogues, drama and declamation. Aspects such as the printed text, oral translation and pictures for support are addressed. The hints for student teachers that are included at the end of each chapter also in this chapter serves to guide the inexperienced teacher along the difficulties of how to cope with both slow and fast learners.

In chapter eight the rewards of mastery of a language are addressed and aspects such as the sense of competence and control and the release from shyness, as well as the naturalistic fallacy and task-based instruction, are highlighted. This good news for teachers is continued in chapter nine with a discussion of how high-quality input via the mother tongue can be maximised. Again in this chapter the very practical nature of the techniques suggested are reassuring: teacher-talk, reading to the class and storytelling; silent reading, the use of translation and re-translation; videos and DVDs as well as repeated hearing and reading with a dual force. The very little output and financial expense involved in implementing such methods should find favour with foreign language teachers, especially in developing countries where resources are scarce. The authors introduce the relatively controversial issue of translation as a fifth skill in bilingual teaching in chapter ten. Not only do they supply convincing argumentation for employing translation from the MT to the FL and vice versa in foreign language learning since it develops both the languages involved; they also suggest useful activities that can be deployed in the exercise of such translations. This is followed up in chapter eleven with suggestions for more bilingual practice such as word trails, monolingual and bilingual word lists, dictionary work, collocations, the importance of memorisation and practising away lexical interference.

Chapter twelve looks at young developing bilinguals and the role that parents can play in the development of bilingualism. It also assesses the importance of a bilingual approach for the deaf by means of sign language, “the natural L1 of the profoundly deaf” as a bridge to verbal languages. This brings the authors to revisit the “natural” method of FL teaching and learning which implies that foreign language learning should be as successful and effortless as language learning “in crib and nursery.” Since MT acquisition is everything but effortless, the authors state that their book “has tried to demonstrate all claims that we follow nature’s blueprint when we exclude MT from FLT are ill-founded.” They conclude that, “any methodology which

not only ignores these tactics [which allow the contemplated use of the MT in FL teaching] but actively prevents children from using them, would manifestly be counter-productive.” In conclusion the reader is given more ideas and practical suggestions for effective foreign language teaching and learning in multilingual classes.

“For we know in part, and we prophesy in part.” This quotation introduces the final chapter of the book in which the authors readily acknowledge that they have tried to understand not only what made foreign language “fail in some classrooms but also what made it tick in other contexts.” Their final advice to the reader is: “Believe in the power of teaching. Experience the excitement of teaching. Teach with MT support. Teach with the wind beneath your wings.”

The Bilingual Reform; A Paradigm Shift in Foreign Language Teaching is more than a well-researched, well-compiled and useful textbook. It is an uplifting experience which helps to refocus the seasoned language teacher and guide novices to be creative, innovative and confident in employing an eclectic approach to the very complicated context of foreign language teaching.

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