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**The double scandal of foreign language teaching**  
(Introductory lecture)

## **What is the evidence?**

This talk is about what I believe is a major scandal, in fact a double scandal surrounding the teaching of foreign languages. Generations of FL pupils have suffered. For many, FL lessons have been either traumatic and degrading or boring and stultifying. How do I know? I will quote extensively from some 500 learners' autobiographical essays and classroom reports which I have collected over three decades. Abundant and irrefutable evidence, if you ask me. Witness the following observations from university students of English looking back at their own schooldays and exposing one side of the scandal.

## **Mother tongue misuse**

- He only spoke English with his pupils when we worked with our books lying in front of us. (Vlado)
- One really wonders how one can be so naïve as to think kids are enabled to speak a foreign language if the teachers themselves don't use it. (Börje)
- The one unforgivable mistake our English teacher made, no matter how nice she was, was that she never spoke English in class. She used German to explain grammar, she spoke German when we had a discussion about an English topic and she used German for organising the class. English was never a means of communication until we got a new teacher. (Sonja)
- In my first four years at secondary school, English was never taught as a means of communication, because the whole lesson was conducted in German. Most of the time there was a dull mood because we always proceeded in the same way. Only later, with a different teacher, English was no longer a language you were drilled in to produce the sentences required, but a medium in which you could express your thoughts and feelings. (Michael)
- One thing was quite unacceptable about our lessons. That was the little amount of contact with the foreign language most pupils had during a lesson. We hardly ever got the chance to say something in class, let alone the opportunity to express our views or needs independently. (Christina)
- My second teacher never spoke English in class, except when a text had to be read out. He thought it artificial for speakers with the same mother-tongue to address each other in a foreign language. It was irritating. (Marion)

- Since the pupils' English was so poor, Mrs....made almost no use of it herself, and the predominant language during the lessons was German: a vicious circle. (Claudia)

So, clearly, one side of the scandal is the abominable misuse of the pupils' MT in the FL class. The reason is often the teachers' own inability to handle the foreign language flexibly and competently. Here are some more quotes:

- I am convinced that the reason for his slipping into German while telling his stories was simply a lack of fluency and flexibility in English. (Norbert)
- I still ask myself: How did she manage to become a teacher? Her pronunciation was disgusting, and whenever possible she spoke German. (Michaela)
- With two native English speakers among the pupils in class, we recognized that he did not only speak English in a way that sounded quite German, he mispronounced complete words and made mistakes most of us would not have made. (Marc)
- She exclusively used German throughout the lessons. I even suspected that she knew no French at all. She panicked nearly every time she had to explain a grammatical problem, saying that it would be too difficult for us. (Nicola)
- Far too many are pretty much out of practice. Most of them visited English speaking countries during their studies but neglected to improve their language abilities after university. (Rahnama)
- We got a very young and inexperienced teacher who could hardly speak Spanish himself. He had to look up nearly everything in a dictionary or a grammar, and as he felt very uncomfortable himself, he avoided difficult grammatical problems and complicated conversations. (Judith)
- After grammar school I attended a commercial school for one year. The English lessons there turned out to be a catastrophe. Our English teacher was not able to speak one single English sentence correctly, consequently he always spoke German. We always had to correct him...
- I was bored most of the time. When we had vocabulary questions she was often not able to give us a translation nor did she have a dictionary with her. I still remember her standard response to those questions: "I will look it up for you later and tell you in the next lesson". The problem was that she never did and soon I did not take her seriously anymore. (Julia)

What a shame!

You might think this is to be expected in countries where teachers are badly trained, badly paid and overworked, such as in some developing countries. Oh no, all this has happened and is still happening in Germany where teachers can easily travel to Britain and immerse themselves in the living language. Incidentally, large-scale empirical

studies from other countries confirm that in spite of official policies, there is still an overuse of L1 in many classrooms. (Mitchell 1988; Calman & Daniel 1998)

This counterproductive, haphazard and time-consuming use of the MT has to be stopped. The solution is obvious. Teachers must be better trained and better supervised. But instead of doing the obvious, governments and professional leaders have caused a second scandal: the MT taboo. The flagrant overuse of the MT at the expense of the target language is scandalous indeed.

### **The mother tongue taboo**

But the very opposite, the banishment of the MT from the FL classroom is no less a scandal. The authorities and many experts who should have known better have reacted to the lazy, uncontrolled use of the MT by throwing the baby out with the bathwater. The MT was simply outlawed and effective well-crafted bilingual techniques such as the sandwich-technique were withheld from teachers.

Again, I can prove this with classroom reports:

- Our teacher never consented to give a German equivalent, which I really detested because I always longed for clarity. (Simone)
- I really hated the fact that the teacher we had in grades 7 – 9 refused to explain words we didn't know in German. She just wrote the word up on the board, but only a few pupils understood her English explanations. When we asked her nicely if she could give us the German equivalent she became angry. But I'd better stop talking about her, as it makes me angry. (Sonja)
- When someone dared to ask for an equivalent, he/she was reprimanded for not paying attention. He strictly rejected the use of the mother tongue, we were forbidden to use it; if we did anyway, we had to do some extra homework. There was never a relaxed atmosphere in his classroom. (Nicole)
- He obviously tried to avoid German. This often had the effect that we were talking about a text which I really had not understood. I often felt very insecure and I did not dare to give an answer because I was afraid of saying complete nonsense that had nothing to do with the text. I often tried to have a secret look at the vocab pages of our book where you could find the German translations. He did not like us to do this because we were supposed to guess the meanings from his English explanations. (Martina)

- Our teacher often lost time when he tried to convey the meaning of verbs through mimes and gestures. When introducing “to fly” he first tried to draw a flying bird on the board. When the meaning was not yet clear he stepped on to a chair and jumped off it while moving his arms. It was ridiculous and not a natural way of teaching English – which he thought it was. English was taught in such a strenuous way that both our teacher and we ourselves were often irritated. (Simone)

## **The monolingual principle as a communication killer**

In the some situations, the monolingual philosophy turns out to be a real communication killer:

- When our teacher gave us homework where we had to write something about ourselves or our family and someone asked for a particular word, she always said we should use the words 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. (Stephanie)
- Both in English and in French we had to express ourselves using the words which we had already learned. But often I felt a real urge to say something which I could only express with a new word that I consequently looked up in a German-English dictionary. I still remember the negative reaction when I brought these new words in to my essays. (Sonja)
- I was not allowed to use any vocabulary the children in my class had not learnt, so I did not even say much in class, as I was afraid to use a word I was not allowed to. (Alison)

Because of this monolingual mismanagement many students have felt disoriented, demotivated, alienated and powerless - and quite needlessly so, which makes it so outrageous and so scandalous. The simple truth is that the call for real, original, personal communication and the ban on the MT are conflicting demands. If it weren't for the monolingual philosophy, the teacher would have allowed the pupils to insert a MT expression and would have tried to provide them with a FL equivalent so that they can say what they really want to say – in the FL.

## **Denial of assistance**

Please don't think I'm exaggerating. Apart from my own documents, there are other reliable sources. Let us go back to 1974 which saw the publication, by the *National Foundation of Educational Research*, of

the final report of a project spanning ten years. A group of researchers had followed three cohorts of primary school children learning French into secondary school, with batteries of tests and questionnaires. This is what students wrote in response to questionnaires:

- 'I never have understood French and I hate it. I have been doing it for five years and I still don't know a thing. It is a real fog to me';
- 'I don't understand it and I never will. I forget the words. I don't think I was cut out for French';
- 'I don't know what the teacher is saying most of the time, because she talks in French. I would like French if I could understand it, but I can't. I know very few French words although I have been learning for five years. This is my fault, as the teachers try to help me';
- 'I cannot understand French. I've been doing it for years and I still can't speak more than a few words';
- 'You can't always understand what you yourself are saying, and you get all muddled up with your words' ...

If that isn't sad, we don't know what is. Claire Burstall (1972, p.138), the main author of the reports, says that most of these pupils feel that their failure to understand French is due to insufficient explanation being given in English. The students' comments in the questionnaires are extremely revealing:

- 'Not enough teachers explain French thoroughly and the children are afraid to speak up and ask';
- 'The teacher goes on and on without explaining what she means'; 'French is harder because the teacher doesn't tell us in English what the word in French means, but does it by actions, and we don't always understand them. If the word means "jump" and we don't know, she jumps – like that. In some cases it isn't an action word. So we speak words in French that we don't understand';
- 'I cannot understand the teacher. She never tells us what she's on about';
- 'Our teacher explains in French and when he has finished I still don't understand a word';
- 'If you ask the teacher what a word means, she always explains it in French, which is no help at all.'

Well, failure to afford help is an offence. An inconsiderate method has been foisted upon teachers and learners alike. How can pupils learn when they bitterly resent the way they are being taught? What this kind of teaching has achieved amounts to terminal discouragement. 25 years later the problem is still the same. Here are the results of a poll of some 1300 Year 9 pupils across four English secondary schools. I quote from the TES (1999):

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,” said Barry Jones, of Homerton College, Cambridge. “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.”

It should be shouted from the rooftops: A FL only approach is outright denial of assistance. It is perverse not to use a tool which is readily available and can solve many problems. After all, patent misuse never precludes proper use.

Proponents of the monolingual philosophy also tend to underestimate the many misunderstandings that occur in classes of the usual size. We are all sense-making animals and tend to make up things we’ve only half understood, fill in the blanks, so to speak. Even bizarre misunderstandings occur because we have the illusion of knowing and don’t see the screwy logic of what we seemingly understood. By means of informal meaning checks at the end of lessons we found that there always was a substantial minority of students who had misunderstood some of the teacher’s explanations – without the teacher noticing it. “Sky” was thought to be “cloud”, power was to mean muscles, etc.

What I propose is that teachers use the students’ mother tongue systematically in clearly-defined circumstances and in tested techniques, alongside proven monolingual techniques, of course.

### **We only learn language once**

Let me briefly explain my theoretical basis:

(1) mother-tongue induced errors, (2) its counterproductive, indeed destructive use by some teachers and (3) the obvious need to immerse our students in the FL have been a barrier to the true understanding of the issues involved. Because there is another side to the coin. We all must start from where we are. We can only learn a new skill by building upon existing skills. This is true for a first language where parents evoke innate abilities that predispose humans for language.

And it is all the more true for second and foreign languages where we can build on both innate as well as acquired skills.

The 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 (1) have learnt to conceptualize their world and have fully grasped what language is for and what it can do for them; (2) they have learnt to communicate; (3) they have developed their voice; (4) they have acquired an intuitive understanding of grammar; (5) they have acquired the secondary skills of reading and writing. In acquiring their first language, their mother tongue, they have in fact constructed their selves. The MT is therefore the greatest asset any human being brings to the task of FL learning. It provides an indispensable Language Acquisition Support System.

Teachers often complain that their pupils have “no grammar”. But central categories like verbs, nouns, adjectives etc. are only profound mysteries to the pupils in the sense that they cannot use words to define them adequately. Given a few MT examples, perhaps a phrase with a slot for adjectives, they will correctly fill the slot with many more adjectives. Grammatical categories live in the minds of school children, they know them in a functional, can-do way, even if they cannot define them properly.

This knowledge, slowly acquired over our formative years, makes the MT the magic key to foreign grammars - regardless of whether the grammars share the same surface features or not. Because they do share an underlying common logic which we have assimilated through our first language, even if they vary in the details of their expressive mechanisms.

Let me give you just one example.

School children, unlike infants, can handle pronouns like *I*, *me*, *my*, *you*, *your* which are difficult because they shift their meanings according to who speaks. At an early stage, infants may say *you*, when they mean *I*, and vice versa. These difficulties and many, many other

grammatical intricacies have long been mastered by the time they come to school. The MT has paved the way.

A basic knowledge of the world and basic grammatical concepts are available at the FL initial state. They are the base camp from which we set out to conquer new language territories. It has taken children years to obtain these competencies which make instruction possible in the first place, be it maths, geography or another language. It makes excellent biological sense for a new language to piggyback on, or plug into, this open channel of communication. Monolingual orthodoxy ignores the very foundations on which FL learning is built.

Pedagogic research has shown that successful learners capitalise on the vast amount of linguistic skills and world knowledge they have accumulated via the MT – whether the teacher skilfully supports these processes or not. Brain research says that learners must make this critically important connection – until the FL has established an ever-more powerful and complex network for itself.

Our job is to assist them in this task instead of ignoring, bypassing or suppressing what goes on in the pupils' minds.

### **The crucial paradox**

To some extent at least the monolingual philosophy actually causes the very misuse of the MT it tries to combat. Because teachers are denied powerful bilingual techniques which make it comparatively easy to create a FL atmosphere, some of them simply give up and use the MT all the time. I want you to understand the apparent paradox that by using the mother tongue skilfully we can open up space for the communicative use of the FL, provide the necessary language bath for our students and eventually conduct whole lessons in the foreign language only. Take the sandwich-technique, for instance, and look it up in *Wikipedia*. Believe me, there are many, many more effective bilingual techniques. However, this is not the place to describe them properly.

Let's no longer be satisfied with an uneasy compromise and a few concessions to the MT. What I propose is not a sort of weak-tea version which has seemed reasonable to many people. The MT is not a choice of last resort, but a first choice. It's more than a lifeline thrown to learners in danger of getting drowned in a sea of uncomprehended language, since there is quite a variety of provably effective bilingual techniques which should be used regularly with beginners.

There is no face-saving compromise with an English-only approach. The profession has committed a debilitating act of self-sabotage. The monolingual principle, with or without small concessions, is spectacularly wrong. Because the learner's native tongue, or another language which has been acquired naturally and become dominant in a learner's life, is the mother of all languages. If we set things right here, millions of language learners will be positively affected. If you want to know more, read this book by Butzkamm & Caldwell or write me an email.

Only the other day I received an email from an American teacher:

Yes! I feel vindicated! I've been chastised by some of my colleagues for years for using some of these techniques (sandwiching, translation).

"Rather than the L1 creeping in as a guilt-making necessity, it can be deliberately and systematically used in the classroom" (V. Cook 2001).

Let us be ready to fight a war on two fronts: against the teacher who conveniently lapses into the MT, which he shares with his pupils, but who is not fluent and flexible enough in the language he teaches and wants to be on easy street; and against monolingual textbooks and the monolingual principle officially endorsed by ministries of education.

If this isn't mainstream yet, you can make it so.