

“Power to the children”: The sandwich technique in the primary school

(Wolfgang Butzkamm)

Wonderful, isn't it.

Give them a stage for the new language, and they love it. They want to do more of the same. And that's half the battle – although it's only first step. But the most important one. Because with a little bit of help from the teacher, they'll soon be able to adapt phrases from the memorized dialogues for their own communicative needs. “We don't eat caviar” will become “I don't eat fish” or “We don't need alcohol” could become “I need a new book”. “What about you?” can be turned into “And what about me?” and so on.

So far, English in German primary schools has not been an unqualified success, to say the least. In fact a leading paper wrote it was a complete botch-up and should be stopped.

But we can make it successful with bilingual techniques combined with new texts. It also means that we change the official guidelines accordingly.

Let's look at the texts:

Home sweet home



Father:  
The doorbell's ringing.  
Can you open the door, please?



Peter:  
No, I can't.  
I'm studying the present progressive.

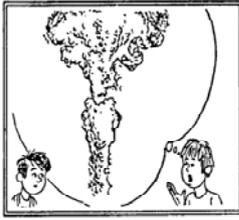


Father (shouting):  
Betty, what about you?

Betty (from another room):  
But I'm filing my nails.



Father:  
And I'm baking a cake.  
For you clowns!!!



Power to the children

Willie:  
Children are better than adults.  
Billie:  
We don't use bombs.



Willie:  
We don't need alcohol.  
Billie:  
We don't eat caviar.  
Willie:  
We don't need fancy clothes.



Willie & Billie:  
Children are better than adults.  
Power to the children!  
Father:  
So we're good for nothing, huh?



Billie:  
No, no, no.  
What about our pocket money?  
Father:  
Sorry.  
I've just spent it on a bomb.

With bilingual techniques content need not be carefully graded to ensure everybody understands. So we can introduce authentic, accurate English at a content level children can enjoy. We've got a present perfect here in the last line of "Power to the children", something which usually comes much later in the course. My children have no problem with this construction because I use the sandwich technique.

## Meaning conveyance: dialogues

- The sandwich-technique  
L2 > L1 > L2 + pause + imitation
- Utterance equivalents (rather than printed word equations)  
Oral equivalents: speech melody and rhythm, voice modulations  
Lip-reading + mimes, gestures, posture (multimodal processing)  
= lexical+grammatical+pragmatic meanings combined

### The sandwich-technique

- L2 > L1 (idiomatic translation / utterance equivalents + mirrored version, if necessary) > L2
- Pause for students just long enough to mouth the phrase silently (do it yourself)
- Point to pupils
- Pupils imitate the phrase (individual & group responses)

This is how the sandwich-technique works. The teacher models a sentence for the children to repeat, and if there is only the slightest uncertainty about the meaning, he gives an oral MT equivalent, i.e. an utterance equivalent, an idiomatic translation, and then repeats the foreign language phrase. In other words, the translation is sandwiched between the original phrase and its repetition. The children could now imitate the phrase, but if it's a difficult phrase to repeat the procedure is a little bit more complicated. Before he signals for the children to repeat – individual or chorus repetition- , the teacher says the phrase again, but silently, and all the children do the same –in time with the teacher's stimulus. They see the teacher's lips moving and he can see their lips moving. So they have a chance of trying the phrase out silently before repeating it out loud. And there is one more thing to pay attention to. At this point don't call on the children by name as this would cause an interference. The echo of the foreign phrase in the children's mind would be disturbed by such calling out of names. So the teacher just points to students.

The idea is to facilitate as much as possible the learners' job to get it right, to pronounce correctly, to train their articulatory organs and to make these organs do what they want them to do.

And to make this easy – as easy as can be - they are handed the meaning on a silver tray, as it were, to free them from the distracting search for meaning. Any uncertainty regarding meaning has a detrimental effect on the pupil's ability to imitate spoken phrases. It's a question of focusing their mental resources on articulation and intonation and the body language that comes with it. Guess less, and understand everything. There is zero uncertainty.

Zero uncertainty should also apply to the structure of the phrase. Learners need an understanding of both function and form. So, if not only the meaning, but also the syntax of the phrase is unclear, the teacher will not only give an idiomatic translation, but will add a literal translation:

Take the phrase *The doorbell's ringing*.

So we adapt the native language to the foreign language, we germanize the English phrase, we graft the MT onto the foreign construction in order to provide the clearest possible understanding.

So, better texts that are more demanding and more interesting at the same time are only a side effect of a bilingual approach. Clarity is all, that's the idea, the double comprehension of function and form.

Notice also that the printed text is available from the beginning and is used to support speaking. But that's another story. All this is fully explained and amply documented in the book by Butzkamm & Caldwell. Let's bring on the FL teaching revolution now!