

THE BILINGUAL REFORM. A PARADIGM SHIFT IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

By Wolfgang Butzkamm, John A.W. Caldwell

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This book aims, “in an act of theoretical house-cleaning”, to sweep away the mother tongue taboo in foreign language teaching, “which has been the perceived didactical correctness for so many years and in so many countries”(p.13) The authors’ firm statement that “Our first language lays the foundation for all other languages that we might want to learn”, and that the mother tongue is the “magic key that unlocks the door to foreign language grammars”(p.14) sets the tone for this thoroughly-researched and practically illustrated call for a fresh approach to foreign language teaching methodology.

With more than a nod to C.J.Dodson’s Bilingual Method (Dodson, 1967) Butzkamm and Caldwell re-examine the tenets of this method, appealing for a more rational, balanced appraisal of some of the shibboleths of language teaching of recent times. Citing Kelly’s conclusion on reviewing 25 centuries of language teaching (1969, 408) that “One generation’s heresy becomes the orthodoxy of the next”, the authors passionately believe that the apparently uncritical adherence to natural/communicative methods that banish the use of mother tongue is madness. The problem seems to reside in the unwillingness and feelings of guilt that teachers have about using MT at all, of compromising widely-practised communicative methods and even of selling out and reverting to outdated grammar-translation methodology. This book represents a spirited and soundly-reasoned plea for the recognition of the central role of bilingual techniques in foreign language teaching, that bring the explicit and focused use of the MT back into the foreign language lesson, while retaining the centrality of the target language as the working language of the classroom. Reference throughout is generally to the teaching of English as a FL, but this should be regarded as the prototype of FL teaching.

In order to usher in what the authors call a “paradigm shift in foreign language teaching”, it is vital to present a coherent and accessible account of the relevant research, supported by practical examples and guidance that teachers will be able to use themselves. The authors achieve this in a singularly effective way, tracing historical background and demystifying theory with a deftness and clarity that forces the reader to reappraise long-held, and perhaps, too firmly entrenched views on language teaching. The chapters address the issues that lie at the very heart of the language teaching and learning process: meaning, communication, understanding, grammar, translation, skills. They are organised under sub-headings, so that no section becomes too long or heavy-going, and each chapter ends with a series of study questions, that invite the reader to reflect further, and to relate to their own experience. Most significant of all, and central to the book’s whole thesis, are the bilingual teaching techniques that the authors declare will rescue the MT from its self-crippling taboo. Thus, a fresh light is thrown upon “sandwich techniques”, “mirroring techniques”, “dual comprehension”, “comprehended (as distinct from “comprehensible”!) input”, “the generative principle”- all sup-

ported by compelling and thought-provoking examples and illustrations from research, the authors' and their students' own teaching experiences and observation of authentic, functioning natural bilingualism.

In an age of declining numbers of language learners and a post-communicative gap in methodology that cries out to be filled, this is a book that demands to be read for its compelling rationale, and impassioned and principled approach to the use of the mother tongue in language teaching. Language teachers' repertoires will be doubled, their teaching revitalised, and, to borrow a contemporary slogan from London 2012, they might even "inspire a generation"!

References:

Dodson, C.J. (1967) *Language Teaching and the Bilingual Method* London: Pitman Publishing

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