

Reviews

The Bilingual Reform: A Paradigm Shift in Foreign Language Teaching

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Too much mother tongue (MT) in the foreign language (FL) classroom can be a dangerous thing:

My last English teacher was really nice but she taught us most of the lesson through German, telling us she wanted us to really understand everything. I think we would have learnt more if she had used German less. We had Spanish only for one year at this stage but lessons were conducted nearly completely in Spanish, while English was taught in German, after seven years of learning this language! Annika (Butzkamm and Caldwell p. 16)

No MT in FL teaching can also be dangerous for learners:

I really hated the fact that the teacher we had in grades 7–9 refused to explain English 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. Even 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 (ibid.)

Most ELT specialists now recognize that the two extreme positions depicted above are untenable. And while no one would question that in an English class English actually needs to be spoken, it is now generally agreed that learners' own languages can be used for certain purposes. As, for example, Harmer (2007: 133–5) says, a teacher can use the students' L1 to talk about the learning process (for example when discussing their needs and expectations), to make comparisons between L1 and L2, and to create a good atmosphere in the classroom.

However, according to *The Bilingual Reform* (p. 18), this kind of 'monolingualism with small concessions'

is not the right solution. A little MT in the classroom can also be a dangerous thing: if it is used in an unregulated way, some teachers may be tempted to conduct most of their classes in it. Instead, the MT should be used systematically with the help of 'sophisticated and powerful' bilingual techniques. It is these techniques that according to the authors (p. 16) are the key to harnessing 'the linguistic resources of the learners for effective foreign language learning (...)'.

The book consists of an introduction, 14 chapters (each containing study questions and tasks), and an epilogue. The publisher claims that '[with] this book, change has come to foreign language teaching'. It certainly has, and in more ways than one: not only do the authors offer a compelling argument for the MT as the foundation of FL teaching but they also present their case in such a way that it is difficult to put down. The clarity of Butzkamm and Caldwell's writing, the ease with which they discuss theory and combine it with practice, and the personal stories told by learners and teachers, all these make for a fascinating reading experience.

Following the Introduction, which sketches the central issues and outlines the authors' goals, in Chapter 1 the authors begin the presentation of their approach by stressing the fundamental role of FL input and oral interaction in the process of learning. Since the 'amount of exposure is critical to language acquisition' (p. 29), lessons should obviously be conducted in the FL. However, this does not mean the exclusion of the MT from the classroom: on the contrary, consistent use of the MT through the technique of sandwiching ('statement in L2, restatement in L1 and again in L2', p. 33) should create an FL atmosphere in the classroom and lead to message-oriented discourse. This is possible because the sandwich technique provides only initial understanding: once the meaning is clear, then only the L2 expression should be used.

In Chapter 2, Butzkamm and Caldwell introduce the principle of dual comprehension, which, in their view, is the essential mechanism behind language

acquisition. The principle states that for a learner to 'break into the speech code', input must be comprehended on two levels: the functional/communicative level and the formal/structural level. In L1 acquisition, such dual comprehension takes place through an interaction of children's natural 'intention-reading and pattern-finding abilities' with the way in which parents shape the input the children receive. In the classroom context, where much less time is available, these natural inductive abilities of learners need to be supported to ensure double comprehension. One way of clarifying form-meaning pairings to learners is through the use of the MT.

Chapter 3 sets out in detail the authors' reasons for adopting the bilingual approach. The exposition is broken down into 11 maxims that present the case for bilingual FL teaching and refute the arguments that have been advanced against it. For Butzkamm and Caldwell, the direct principle is a delusion: as, for example, word recognition experiments show, learners' own languages cannot be switched off. This, however, does not mean that they are a necessary evil that simply has to be accepted: they are the greatest asset that beginner learners bring into the learning process. The connection that learners make between new linguistic knowledge and their L1 skills is vital until 'the FL has established an ever more powerful and complex network for itself' (p. 74).

Chapter 4 deals with the questions of communicative equivalence and cross-linguistic networks. In brief, Butzkamm and Caldwell argue (p. 90) that 'whatever can be said, can be translated', i.e. that MT approximations can always be provided for initial understanding. Such MT equivalents, whether exact or approximate, may be seen as temporary items to be complemented by other meanings in later stages of learning. For lexical items to be retained, it is useful, the authors argue, to build cross-linguistic networks in which target language words are linked to MT cognates.

'Clarity is all; confusion equals frustration' (p. 103). Grammar, then, should be made clear, it is argued in Chapter 5. To do so, we can use MT aids like idiomatic translations, structural mirroring, and, in particularly tough cases, additional explanations. Teachers should, however, beware of the danger of over-explaining: (translated) examples are normally easier to understand than lengthy explanation or rules. Too much grammar may be bad, but too little of it is equally harmful: if chunks of structure are left for learners doing three hours per week to analyse on their own, then many of those chunks will fossilize.

Grammatical constructions that are clarified must also be retained and put to use. That is, in accordance with the generative principle, students need to learn how to find patterns among exemplars and build 'new forms according to known forms' (p. 120). Chapters 6 and 7 tell us how to achieve this by using the bilingual approach, which builds upon Dodson's work in the second half of the previous century (for example Dodson 1967/1972). The way to start is through semi-communicative drills: the teacher gives stimulus sentences in the MT, the students respond in the target language. The exercise is gradually personalized with students ultimately being asked to produce their own examples. When they are presented, the teacher should use them as an opportunity for 'communicative interludes', i.e. communicative exchanges of information. Further examples of pedagogical tools that Butzkamm and Caldwell extensively argue for are dialogues, drama, and declamation.

Butzkamm and Caldwell do not see language as 'nothing but' a skill, but as they explain in Chapter 8, the learning theory behind the procedures in the previous chapters is skill learning theory. This means that there are no 'quick and easy shortcuts' and that 'it is focused, effortful practice that is crucial' (p. 167). As a result of such practice, there are qualitative changes in the way knowledge is represented in the brain, and there is also an increase in the speed of performance. Holistic learning advocated by many proponents of task-based approaches is dismissed by Butzkamm and Caldwell as the 'naturalistic fallacy'.

Chapters 9, 10, and 11 all contain further examples of ways in which learner's own languages can be used as aids in FL learning. In Chapter 9, the focus is on input and how its comprehension can be maximized with MT support (as, for example, in bilingual readers and subtitled movies). In Chapter 10, the benefits of translation activities are discussed: they include focus on preciseness and accuracy, possible integration with communicative activities, and increasing learners' awareness of the leeway of interpretation. Finally, Chapter 11 delivers 'more bilingual practice' through, for example, work on vocabulary items and collocations.

In Chapter 12, the authors argue that the only natural model which can be adopted in FL teaching is that of 'the child who is raised bilingually', as in linguistically mixed marriages. Although in such contexts the two linguistic systems develop separately, bilingual children make use of learning strategies that involve both languages. The strategies include asking for equivalent expressions, contrasting such expressions, and using mixed-language utterances.

For Butzkamm and Caldwell, the fact that these natural strategies are so common makes 'the exclusion of the MT from the FL classroom seem almost perversely wrong' (p. 223).

'Spitting and speaking Breton are forbidden', a railway carriage sign from a not so distant past, illustrates how minority languages were sometimes treated (p. 230). The present situation may not be that bad, but as Butzkamm and Caldwell say in Chapter 13, minority students would still benefit from a greater recognition of their home languages. In multilingual classes learners' own languages need not be ignored (or, which is worse, outlawed). There are ways of incorporating them into instruction, for example through parallel texts and time-outs for group work in the MT. Research shows that such aids contribute substantially to overall learning success.

Why are there so many who behave as if the history of FLT was a succession of failed methods? (...) Why be so arrogantly dismissive of ideas and practices such as pattern drills and the PPP paradigm, which have been used by excellent practitioners quite aware of what they were doing? (p. 242)

These are just two of many important questions asked in Chapter 14, the final chapter of the book. In asking these questions, Butzkamm and Caldwell appeal to researchers to heed the lessons of history and to investigate procedures, which over the centuries have worked for many teachers and learners, saying 'The study of the history of language teaching deserves a central place in teacher education (...)'. (p. 241).

FL teachers are often sceptical about new theories and practical solutions proposed by SLA researchers. Teachers' practice is 'often rooted in more traditional ways of doing things' (Swan 2007: 295). This is hardly surprising, given that at different times they have been told

to ignore the learners' mother tongue; to base teaching on contrasts between the mother tongue and the second language; to avoid showing beginners the written word; to establish habits by drilling; to refuse to explain grammar; to explain grammar but avoid drilling; to rely exclusively on comprehensible input; to minimize opportunities for error; to regard errors as constructive; not to ask questions to which the teachers know the answers; to use simplified material; to avoid using simplified material; and so on. (Swan 2005: 397)

The Bilingual Reform by Butzkamm and Caldwell, however, is a completely different story. It is not

'legislation by hypothesis'. It is a remarkable book, which in a masterly way draws upon SLA research, the accumulated experience of teachers, and countless testimonies of learners. In each of these areas, the authors' expertise is impressive. If their proposals are implemented, it will be a true paradigm shift. This book is an absolute must for anyone involved in FL instruction: one may not subscribe to every claim Butzkamm and Caldwell make, but knowing what these claims are is a necessary thing.

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