Why make them crawl if they can walk?
Teaching with mother tongue support

The article addresses the long-standing issue over the role of the mother tongue in the foreign language classroom. In the first part it is argued that the mother tongue lays the cognitive foundations for all subsequent language learning. The second part is practical. It focuses on two bilingual techniques, idiomatic translations for the clarification of grammatical functions, and mother tongue mirroring which makes grammatical forms transparent and shows their hidden logic. Examples are from various languages, but are especially drawn from Mandarin since a remote language best illustrates the need for systematic mother tongue support.

The natural method re-visited

In practice, the monolingual approach derives much of its force and appeal from the counterproductive, haphazard and time-consuming way the mother tongue (MT) is so often employed by disaffected teachers. Some of them don't know the foreign language (FL) well enough to use it flexibly for communication in the classroom. "Less skilled and less proficient teachers simply succumb to the ease of conducting the class in the MT" (Butzkamm & Caldwell 2009, 86). But the MT taboo that has been with us for a century simply throws the baby out with the bathwater. *Abusus not tollit usum*, as the Romans knew: Patent misuse does not preclude proper use.

In theory, the MT taboo springs from the desire to imitate first language acquisition. Children have no other language to refer to when they start to understand. The direct method, or the monolingual principle, was an attempt to follow nature's blueprint, and *natural method* was another name for *direct method*.

Nevertheless there are five fundamental differences between L1 acquisition and FLT.

Consider the sheer amount of time young children spend on language compared to the time set aside for the FL in schools or language courses. L1 acquisition takes several years in which children hear millions of utterances.

Hart and Risley (1995) studied for two and a half years the spoken interactions between parents and children in 42 families. They spent one hour per month with each family in the home, recording every word spoken between parent and child, so that eventually they had amassed 1,300 transcripts of approximately 20

pages each. Their data clearly revealed that the most important aspect of children's language experience is its amount. "With few exceptions, the more parents talked to their children, the faster the children's vocabularies were growing and the higher the children's IQ test scores at age three and later."

Now think of students who spend a mere 5 hours a week in a conventional language class over a school year. Classrooms can never provide enough exposure for the learners to sort out the many complexities of a language all by themselves. Mere exposure to the FL cannot lead to learning, simply because there's never enough of it. The evidence students get is too slender for them to extract the many patterns and extrapolate rules, even in so-called immersion programmes.

Apart from the time handicap teachers have to cope with, classrooms radically differ from L1 acquisition situations in other aspects:

- The new language cannot really be lived: it cannot be used while eating, cooking, going shopping or quite generally doing things where the meaning clearly springs from the situation at hand.
- Fifteen to thirty learners have to share one mature, accomplished speaker, whereas in families communication with the infant is usually one-to-one.
- Motivation: There is no urgency behind FL use because there is always another language to fall back on to satisfy immediate and compelling communicative needs.
- Never can the FL become the medium of intimacy and love to the extent that the MT quite naturally is in child-parent interactions. Parents greet new words with delight and actively encourage their child to go on talking however mutilated and imperfect their words may be.

So no matter what we do, there is a dearth of comprehensible input from, interaction with, and feedback from mature speakers, a dearth for which we have to find some sort of compensation by artful pedagogy.

What, then, are those compensations? Again, there are five things that need mentioning:

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, 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.

Let us go into some detail here. No child starts a second language with a blank slate. It's already been written on. Two-to-three-year-olds have learnt to represent their experiences in words and can transfer thoughts from their head to someone else's. They have words for whole arenas of experience: food, clothing, the weather, family, playmates and animals, television, hobbies and pastimes, and, last but not least, number. Now, when learning an FL, rather than re-conceptualise the world, we need to extend our concepts, with any necessary cultural adjustment or refinement. Conceptually, then, most teaching texts are for them an all too well-known landscape, but disguised in a new language.

2. From birth on, children are learning how to communicate, first non-verbally, and about a year later, verbally. No school child needs to be told what a question is. They know what telling a lie is. They know when and why to say thank you. (At first children might say 'thank you' both when receiving things and giving things). They know that requests, wishes or warnings can masquerade as statements. Do we really need extra training in making intelligent guesses from context? No, because we have been doing it all the time in our mother tongues.

3. Before they come to school, children have practised for years to become better vocalizers and articulators. Parents have often worried about persistent difficulties their children had with individual sounds or sound combinations. They expect them to master all the MT sounds by the time they go to school. As adults, if *we* know what we want to say in our MT, the sounds and rhythms of speech are there for us instantly, automatically, effortlessly.

4. FL 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 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 a few examples. 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 have long been mastered by the

time they come to school. The MT has paved the way. Or take passive constructions, which again are acquired step by step. In the beginning, children's strategy of taking the first noun in the sentence to be the doer leads them astray. In L1 English or German this is gradually sorted out, mainly through semantically irreversible passives such as "The girl was bitten by the spider" where the original strategy fails to make sense. Something like this might go on in the children's minds in milliseconds: "The girl – comes first – so what does she do? – biting – who is she going to bite? – the spider – but wait, girls can't bite spiders – so it must be the other way round. Something happens to her." So there are sentences where the person who comes first is obviously not the doer, but quite the opposite. Again, this kind of re-analysis has been established before they encounter a foreign language in school.

Here's just one more example: We take it for granted that we can say "my head" and "my father" as well as "my garden". But we are also mentally prepared to use a different possessive for "my garden", as some languages in fact do – because it makes sense to distinguish between 'alienable' and 'inalienable' possession'. "My head" and "my father" will remain my head and my father as long as I live, but I can sell my garden.

It is because all languages have evolved means of expressing core concepts such as possession, number, (un)countables, action, completed action, ongoing action, repeated action, the doer of an action, instrument, negation, possibility, causation, condition, and a host of others, no matter how they actually do this, -- because of such common core concepts one natural language is enough to open the door for the grammars of other languages. We are mentally prepared for these categories. We have gained access, through the MT, to an overall logic found in all languages. In a nutshell: two or more languages, one mind, one brain.

It's all there already. All these skills and knowledge sources, including world and grammatical concepts and literacy, 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 this open channel of communication. Monolingual orthodoxy ignores the very foundations on which FL learning is built.

Modern brain research also tells us that learners *must* make this critically important connection to existing neural networks – until the FL has established an ever-more powerful and complex network for itself.

There is, however, one type of language growth which, from an FL perspective, is loss rather than growth, so that the MT turns out to be a hindrance instead of a help. As listeners, infants start out ready for any language, but then reorganize their phonetic perception from universal to language-specific. As they tune in to the sounds of their first language, they show a decline in sensitivity to sound distinctions used in languages that are not their own – the perceptual magnet effect (Kuhl 1991). On our way for holidays in the Provence, I asked my 3-year-old daughter to sing along with me "This old man, he played one …" and to join us in "Sur le pont d'Avignon …". What we heard was the accent typical of a German native speaker. She substituted German "wann" for "one", "sur" /syr/ became /zyr/ , etc. She transformed the actual sounds into sounds closer to the MT sounds. By six to twelve months of age, the baby is no longer a citizen of the world but has become a member of a tribe (see Gopnik et al., 2001, 123). It is indeed as early as that.

So it is at the level of sounds that the native language most distinctly intrudes on the learner's foreign languages. Here, indeed, is a major challenge to the learning of a new language, one which can make life miserable for FL learners. Because of our auditory losses, many language learners have experienced frustration and even desperation, to the point of giving it all up – as is testified, for instance, by Christian missionaries in China (Wu 2010). Most of us will never get rid of our accents. It cannot be emphasized too strongly that it is only here that the MT proves to be a burden rather than a blessing for FL learners, who have to re-educate their ears and develop new auditory habits. However, this will remain pretty much an equal factor in classroom language learning no matter whether we use a monolingual or bilingual approach.

The principle of double comprehension

Let me move on to what I consider is the main factor in FLL, the basic requirement, the essential condition for language learning to take place. Krashen said all we need is comprehensible input: "Humans acquire language in only one way – by understanding messages, or by receiving comprehensible input." (Krashen 1985, 2) "It may be that all the teacher need do is make sure that students understand what is being said or what they are reading" (Krashen & Terrell 1983, 33).

Well, no.

In Malta, years ago, I saw a book *Il-princep iz-zghir* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry in a book shop, and I knew immediately what it was: *The Little Prince*, of course. But is understanding the message really enough? This is where I differ from Krashen: Understanding must occur on two levels, on a message level and structural level, or on a functional and a formal level.

In order to make real progress, the child must not only understand what is meant, but must also see through the linguistic structure. Thus, for the language system to be acquired, a double transparency or double comprehension is necessary. We must understand both what is meant, and what is literally said: Il princep iz –zghir = *The prince the little. We can then go from "The little prince" to, let's say, "the dead sea" (il bahar il-mejjet), "the red sea" (il bahar-l'ahmar) etc.

In France, the tourist may quickly learn to say "s'il vous plaît" whenever appropriate. However, not until he can break the expression down to its meaningful parts has he received input that can be grammatically processed. Only then can he be expected to analogize – subconsciously or consciously – and try phrases he has never heard before such as "si l'hôtel vous plaît". Understanding the structure and not just the message can multiply our production potential a thousand times. This is when language learning really takes off.

Ideally, then, the learners receive messages and along with them, transparent syntactical data. This puts them in a position to notice which utterance parts correspond with which components of the situation and how the pieces fit together, so that they can figure out the message *and* its structure.

Clarifying grammatical functions through idiomatic translations.

Idiomatic translations can provide a spontaneous intuitive understanding without recourse to language analysis. Do you know "the two- part proportional conjunction used to show that two things change to the same degree?" Of course you do. But examples do the job, not the linguistic definition:

The more you practise, the better you get.
The louder you speak, the better one understands you.

"Proportional conjunction" is as clear as mud to most learners, even if it was given in the learner's native language. In many cases we can spare learners headaches over difficult terminology. For Germans at least, the translation *is* already the grammar:

Je mehr du übst, desto besser wirst du.
Je lauter du sprichst, desto besser versteht man dich.

It is enough to clarify both meaning and structure. In other cases, we may need more to achieve double comprehension. It depends on what learners already know.

A second example: „We use the imagined past conditional when we want to talk about something which might have happened but didn't happen, and the imagined consequences." Correct as it is, without sentences to illustrate it such a rule would be gobbledegook to many learners. A sentence or two, plus an idiomatic MT equivalent, are likely to clarify things, as in the following:

	German	French
If it had rained, we would have stayed at home.	Wenn es geregnet hätte, wären wir zuhause geblieben.	S'il avait plu, on serait resté à la maison.

Test these two rules (without example sentences) on advanced learners of English asking them to provide their own sentences that exemplify the rule…

So rather than slinging around technical jargon let's use bilingual techniques to offer immediately accessible insight. Real-life examples, doubly understood, are unwritten, silent rules which reflect language behaviour directly. People can learn foreign languages even if they are out of their depth when it comes to language analysis. Our minds were specially designed to learn languages, but not to do the mental acrobatics of linguistic analyses.

Clarifying grammatical forms through MT mirroring

In textbooks sold around the globe to teach the world the grammar of English you can find explanations like the following : "If there is no question word in the direct question, we use *if* or *whether* in the indirect question." Translation will do the job without further ado:

	German	French
He wants to know if …	Er will wissen, ob…	Il veut savoir si…

But when it comes to Chinese, we need an additional literal translation

He wants to know if she is at home.	tā xiǎng zhīdào, tā shìfǒu zài jiā 他想知道, 她是否在家	*He wants to know, she yes-no is at home.

The Chinese phrase, x-rayed as it were, reveals a beautiful solution as compared with a meaningless conjunction used by English and other languages. We don't need an explicit rule, because, given a few examples, we get to know the construction implicitly, in a functional can-do way.

So here is a bilingual technique which can be extremely helpful but is never used in monolingual teaching contexts. Butzkamm & Caldwell (2009, 106ff.) have called it mirroring, and it is a kind of literal translation adapted for teaching purposes.

In our MT we see through the words to the meaning so automatically and effortlessly that we normally don't pay attention to how things are said. But an FL often confronts us with bizarre, unheard-of, unthought-of ways of organizing thoughts. Here we need the clearest possible understanding not only of what is meant, but of what is actually said. We need to identify the meaning components and where they appear in a foreign language sentence, and mirroring is an elegant and highly time efficient way of achieving this.

Let's compare how some languages tell the time of the day:

It's three o'clock.
  • German: Es ist drei Uhr.   *It's three clock.
  • French: Il est trois heures. *It's three hours.
  • Finnish: Kello on kolme.   *Clock is three.
  • Spanish: Son las tre. /   Es la una
            *Are the three / Is the one.

  • Mandarin:xiànzài shì sān   diǎn(zhōng).
            *now   is three point (clock).
            * now   is three stroke (of) clock

Telling the time is normally practised monolingually, using old-fashioned alarm clocks or cardboard clocks. But they only work because learners already understand the concept of telling the time, which can be triggered equally well both by non-verbal means and by MT cues. But the actual wording of the time phrase should also be taught, and this is where clocks or pictures can't help. Only if students see the logic of the FL time phrase, will they by themselves change Spanish 'son las tres' to 'es la una', as they go from three o'clock to one o'clock. Understanding the logic is satisfying. With adult learners, nothing is gained through bypassing the MT formula, whereas children certainly enjoy manipulating clocks. I remember a teacher practising telling the time in French with a toy clock, without resorting to the MT. The pupils used the phrases correctly, but as an observer, one couldn't help having the impression that some of them had no idea of how the French expressed the phrase "a quarter to three" – "trois heures moins le quart", i.e. "three o'clock minus a quarter". The logic that there are minutes missing from the full hour is impeccable and close to the

Chinese (*chà*), but is not so compelling to English and German speakers, who look forward to the full hour.

Children naturally use this mirroring trick. An Australian primary school child proudly explained to me: "In English we say 'half past twelve', in German it's 'half to one', but they leave out the 'to' and just say 'halb eins'."

Let us suppose learners have come across the following questions in Chinese and know what they mean:

Mandarin

| hǎo bù hǎo?   好不好? | Is it good?   *Good, not good? |
| nán bù nán?   难不难? | Is it difficult? *Difficult, not difficult? |

Learners will probably instantly get the idea and grasp the construction so that they can make their own questions straightaway, questions they might never have heard before :

Mandarin

| guì bù guì?   贵不贵? | Is it expensive? *Expensive, not expensive? |
| yuǎn bù yuǎn?   远不远? | Is it far? *Far, not far? |

Likewise, mirroring is not necessary for Chinese constructions such as "Miller Professor" or "Miller Mr", since the right order immediately leaps out at us.

But the following basic pattern certainly demands clarification.

wǒ   è   le.
I'm hungry.
*I   hungry   le (particle, meaning *temporary change of state, situation*)

Knowing how to say "I'm hungry" can help a globetrotter in a difficult situation. But language learners must also know how this idea is expressed in Mandarin. This double comprehension is both necessary and sufficient.
But what do we do with particles such as "le" which cannot be mirrored?
Here's what I suggest. At first, the function of the particle must be explained. Explanations should be short and to the point. Then we simply insert the particle in the mirrored version at the right place, as long as the learner needs this kind of reminder. This is the way the Chinese say it:

*I thirsty le.

*He sleepy le.
*She angry le.
*She tired le.
*She ready le…"

By making the MT dovetail with the FL construction, we achieve an uncomplicated clarity. Is there an easier explanation for the following Chinese constructions which are just a little bit un-English?

*<u>Because</u> he lost his wallet, <u>so </u>he couldn't pay for it.
*<u>Although</u> he was sick, <u>but </u>he still came to school.
The soup was too hot to eat. *Soup too hot, can't drink.

Empirical evidence in favour of grammatical exercises with MT support has been provided by Elek& Oskarsson (1973), Sheen (2005) and Vaezi & Mirsaei (2007).

Mirroring and the generative principle

This is one way of making comparisons in Chinese:

Shànghǎi bǐ Běijīng dà.
Shanghai is bigger than Beijing. (That's what it means)
*Shanghai *bǐ* (≈ compare) Beijing big. (That's how it is expressed)

Give your students just one more example, then make them translate orally two simple sentences such as "Rome is older than Berlin" , "Mozart is better known than Handel" and finally, and never leave out this step, get them to make up their own sentences. The phrase can now serve as a kind of syntactical germ cell and spawn many similar phrases: *English bi Chinese difficult. English is more difficult than Chinese. Or the other way round: *Chinese bi English difficult. Chinese bi English old. *Chinese bi English beautiful. Of course, this is a risky business. Learners will quite naturally expand the pattern as suggested by their MT. They will try to make "infinite use of finite means" (W.v. Humboldt 1836 / 1963, 477), but must also learn how far they can ride a pattern. Language learning involves taking such risks.

So this a very practical tip, the ideal teaching sequence:
1. Double clarification – message and medium- , perhaps with two examples;
2. two more MT examples for immediate translation by the students
3. Learners make up their own examples.

Mirroring helps us get a feel for the "top-heavy" character of Chinese which uses premodification rather than postmodification:

> * In the morning three o'clock.
> *I with him went to see a movie.
> * I want on the shelf the book.
> *I towards Chinese feel interested.
> This is the book I'd like to recommend to you.
> *This is the I'd like to recommend to you book
> He is the person I most admire.
> *He is I most admire person

We get a sense of how the Chinese construct their thoughts.

Mirroring can thus make "odd" constructions "legitimate" in the eyes of the learner (Chaudhuri 2009, 213), and the understanding that comes with it can be deeply satisfying. It is a shame that this central technique of unravelling the puzzle of foreign expressions should be so little used in classrooms and textbooks for schools. However, it is often to be found in self-study courses and online courses, as well as – surprise, surprise – in scientific grammars for linguists.

Idioms and compounds

Dual comprehension is most clearly illustrated by idiomatic phrases. Everybody loves idioms which help us to express an idea forcefully. But over and above knowing what they actually mean, so as to use them properly, we want to know how they come to mean what they mean. It is not claimed that this knowledge significantly enhances language proficiency, but that it is worthwhile in its own right. We all want to go beyond mere rote-learning. So, for example, we can compare the elements of some English and Chinese idiomatic equivalents:

Spend money like water = spend money like soil
Lead a dog's life = live a pig's and dog's life
Practice makes perfect. = Practice can make mastery.
Fight fire with fire = Use poison defeat poison

The same applies to compounds, for instance "traffic light" is worded *red green light, "computer" is literally *electronic brain, etc.

Searching for MT analogies

FL grammar becomes much less intimidating if we find examples of parallel constructions in the native language. It is another means of learning by example instead of by precept. Grammar is no longer "something out there in the foreign language, but is in fact part of our own everyday language." (Deller & Rinvolucri 2002, 28).

So in order to get the facts of the Chinese plural straightened out, it is helpful to start with similar English constructions. In Chinese, we can't just order "a beer please", it has to be "a glass (of) beer". That means we refer to parallel lawful English constructions such as "a sheet of paper", "a strand of hair", "two pieces of furniture", "two bars of soap", which is the English trick to make uncountables or mass nouns countable. We can then explain that Mandarin nouns all behave like mass nouns in English. And we can move on to odd-sounding examples. In Chinese "one pen" would be something like *"one rod of pen", "two rivers" is worded *"two strip river", "two books" is *"two volume book", etc. Such classifiers or measure words are also needed when one wants to specify a word, after *this, that, every* and after the question words *which & how many* .

Again I suggest starting out with a bilingual drill where the teacher simply inserts the classifier in the mother tongue cue:

Teacher	Student
This ge word	zhè gè zì.
Every ge word	měi gè zì.
Every ge teacher	měi gè lǎoshī.
Which ge teacher?	nǎ gè lǎoshī?
How many ge students?	duō shǎo gè xuéshēng?

And now over to you!

We should look for correspondences between native and foreign language, even if they are only partial and indirect, to help learners in their intuitions about how the FL works and to deforeignise the foreign as much as possible.

Conclusion

MT and FL can enter into a powerful alliance. In the final analysis, the perspectival flexibility of one language to elucidate the form-meaning constructions of another is without equal. Only language is rich, nuanced and supple enough to explain language. Advanced learners can stay within the confines of the FL. But beginners and intermediate learners should be helped to

exploit the exuberant richness and diversity of a naturally acquired language to understand the bewildering complexities of a new language.

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