

7. Acquiring L2 via L1

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Abstract

The title of this year's TESOL France Colloquium could be applied to the ideas in this article: Bridging the Gap. Many years ago, using a native language in a second language classroom was totally forbidden but more and more evidence shows that a native language can bridge the gap and help students learn the target language. The ideas for exercises proposed in this article could be used in almost any L2 classroom.

Let me start by quoting the words of a North American teacher:

“I used to be one of those teachers who enforced the “No L1” rules. I stamped out non-English words in my classroom as an exterminator does cockroaches. I even went so far as put a jar on my desk to collect fines in. I said, ‘For every non-English outburst I shall collect 25 cents.’ That sort of worked and was even funny until one day a Swiss student stashed a 20 dollar bill in the jar and spent the rest of the day jabbering away in German.

Along with many other teachers round the world, my view on L1 inclusion has since changed. I now see the learner's first language as a bridge – not a barrier – to the second language. But why should I have felt this negatively about L1 in the first place? Where has this notion come from that a learner's native language is to be left outside the classroom?”

(quoted from www.disal.com.br/nroutes/nr13 a website in Brazil)

While the above writer has come to feel that L1 is a bridge across to L2, I would use stronger language and suggest that L1 is the womb which nurtures and helps to bring forth L2. It is the brilliant process of learning L1 that makes it possible for a learner to come into L2, 3 or 4.

If you at least partially share this belief, then you will want to get your hands on exercises that use a judicious mix of L1 and L2. Here are a few.

Bilingual, one-word dialogues to revise vocabulary

Suppose you want students to revise some new L2 words students have met in a

reading or a listening exercise. Simply ask them to have a one-word-only conversation, using the L2 and L1 versions of the word. For example :

- Student 1: butterfly?
- Student 2: papillon, papillon, papillon!
- Student 1: papillon...butterfly...?
- Student 2: Mmmm...butterfly...papillon, papillon
- Student 1: butterfly, butterfly, butterfly!

This dialogue practice fixes the L2 word in the student's mind and links it with the deeply felt reality of the mother tongue version of the word. The exercise is particularly good with auditorily-gifted students.

Bilingual dictation

Imagine you are learners of Modern Greek. Write down what I am going to dictate guessing how to spell the Greek words as best you can.

*Rudolf Steiner recommended that **pethia** should be grouped in the **taxi** according to temperament. This way the **thaskalos** has a clearer command of the whole situation **tis taxis**. His golden **kanonas** is never to go against the temperament **tu pethiu**. In telling a **paramithi**, or in narrating a piece of **istoria**, the **thaskalos** has this well in mind.*

Your task now, having written the mixed text down, is to make sure you can discover or guess the meaning of each Greek phrase.

Bilingual Story

In text construction, the two-language story resembles the two-language dictation that you have above, though it demands more skill from the teacher. In the telling, he or she highlights the L2 words and phrases so they acoustically tower over the surrounding L1 text.

This technique has been very successfully used in UK primary school reception classes in areas where there is a large intake from one ethnic community. Say the children are Bengali speakers, the first telling will be in Bengali with a few key words in English. A couple of days later the teacher will tell the kids the story again with more words now in English. After several more tellings each containing less

and less mother tongue words, the day arrives for a white teacher, not wearing a sari, to come into class and tell the whole tale in English. The kids are wowed by the fact that they understand virtually every word!

Bilingual story telling can usefully be the central plank in teaching younger children. It is simply prodigiously efficient.

Mixed-language reading texts are also very effective with adults. The late Ray Tongue, when working as a British Council officer in Indonesia, produced two-language readings for young Brits who needed to learn Indonesia Bahasa fast. As they were all talented language learners the transition from L1 to L2 was a pretty rapid one.

An L1 – L2 Game

There is an excellent activity called **Mindgame**, published by Clarity, (www.clarity.com.hk) which allows students to take in and digest large amounts of target language vocabulary. If you know the games Othello or Reversi, then Mindgame is easy to understand. Let me explain:

You play the game on a board with counters that are white on one side and black on the other. On one side they have the English version of a word written on them on the other side the French version (e.g. vache/cow).

Let's say you are playing white and I am playing black. You lay one of your pieces white-face-up so that one of my black pieces lies between two of your white pieces. You now have my piece "under attack". To complete the attack you need to correctly translate the French word on my piece into English. When you have done this you turn my piece over so it becomes white (your color) and English (your language). then it is my turn to try and turn one of your white English pieces into black and French.

Readers who find the above description unclear, should go to the Clarity website and play a bit of the game there.

If you use the **Mindgame** CD Rom with your students, they will have learnt the rules within five minutes by interacting with the screen.

Ambiguous Dictation

The initial instruction for this exercise is very simple.

“Please take down these sentences in your mother tongue.” Say nothing about the sentences being ambiguous. Give the dictation

- We love them all the same (we love them equally / we love them anyway)
- Do women see double meanings as well as men? (men and women both see double meanings / women see men + double meanings)
- Cleaning ladies can be delightful. (do you clean ladies? / women who clean)
- He fed her dog food. (she ate dog food / the dog ate)
- No. Sorry, I've got a week off (a wee cough / a weak cough)
- They neither of them loved only children.
- 1000 British Marines are expected to go to Afghanistan.
- I was thinking about you coming here. (on my trip here I was thinking about you / I was thinking you might visit)
- He said he was worried about the death rate of surgeons (too many surgeons die / surgeons kill too many people)
- Are we going to a pier / to appear?
- FULL STOP TO PAY TOLL (On a Sydney Harbour Bridge)

Group the students in fours to share their translations. Still say nothing about the ambiguities involved. Once the students have discovered how ambiguous some of the sentences are, tell them that the ones they need to concentrate on are the ones that seem to them to be unambiguous.

Round off the lesson by going through any sentences where students cannot see the ambiguity.

Conclusion

Some readers of these pages may remain unconvinced and continue to nurture a firm belief in the direct method that bans mother tongue from the foreign language classroom. I have met many teachers in this frame of mind.

If, on the other hand, you see the good sense of the approach implicit in the above

exercises, then you may feel that you want to share good two-language activities you already use. There is a real need for inventive methodologists to provide us with many more bilingual activities; an area of endeavor that has been "off bounds" for the last thirty years.

If you have such exercises hidden in your bag, why not send them to the TESOL France Newsletter for publication, or to the magazine I ran which you will find at www.hltmag.co.uk?

Mario Rinvoluceri edits *Humanising Language Teaching* which you will find at www.hltmag.co.uk, Pilgrims' web'zine for teachers. Mario's latest book is *Humanising your Coursebook* with Etp Delta, which came out in early 2002. His next book, with Sheelagh Deller, is *Using the Mother Tongue, The Mother Tongue as a resource in the foreign language classroom*, also with Etp Delta. Mario is a founder member of the Pilgrims team.

Greek/English key

pethia : children

taxis : class

thaskalos : teacher

tis taxis : of the class

kanonas : rule

tu pethiu : of the child

paramithi : legend

istoria : history