

Unity in diversity.

All languages dance the same dance. For FL learners the mother tongue is the mother of all languages.

Ethnographers and anthropologists have entertained us with amusing stories of cultural practices. These practices, which may seem quaint to some of us, are real nonetheless, as real as the differences between languages. For instance, we are interested in the rites, simple or elaborate, developed in many of the world's cultures, to predict the future. Ways, basically, of asking the gods. As we marvel at these strikingly different practices and beliefs we ignore what is common to them. I mean of course, the apparently universal human need to see into the future, to decipher what is ahead of us, what is to come, in order to help us make the right decisions. We tend to overlook that there is a common ground here, same as we overlook the core concepts behind the various expressive devices of different languages. Essentially, all languages dance the same dance. All of them have evolved ways of stating, negating, asking for information etc., they have developed means of expressing ideas such as possession, location in place and time, amount, agent or doer, instrument, possibility, causality etc. By the time they go to school, children have heard thousands of if-clauses, so popular with parents. So they know quite a lot about setting conditions and negotiating them. Or watch a mother and a child with a picture book: "And where's the girl who... Can you see the car which..." Relative clauses over and over again, used to identify people and things. Okay, not all languages have relative clauses, but they certainly have ways of clearly identifying persons and objects in speech. And not all languages have a word for "if", but can nevertheless express the idea of conditionality. And because of these core concepts and functions common to all languages, because of this unity in diversity we can map languages onto each other, no matter how differently they express these ideas.

Here are three easy examples from beginners' classes of a bilingual technique which can be extremely helpful but is never used in English-only teaching contexts. I have called it mother tongue mirroring. It is a kind of literal translation adapted for teaching purposes, a way of unpacking opaque phrases and unravelling the puzzle of FL expressions.

(1) The teacher, going round the class, strikes out a word or sentence and says "Once more". The pupils have figured out that they are expected to correct the word or phrase, but have no clear idea of what the teacher has actually said. It

could be *wrong, not correct, do it again* etc. Unless the kids see it in writing, *once more* might very well be one word. *Noch einmal* would be the idiomatic German translation (= functional comprehension), but the teacher could have added “**Einmal mehr*, this is what we say in English” (= formal / structural comprehension).

(2) A teacher regularly takes leave of her children using the formula: “See you tomorrow”. In German this would be “Bis morgen” (= *Till tomorrow), and this is what the children quite naturally assume their teacher is saying. But only if they understand that the English literally say **Seh euch morgen*” would they be able to produce sentences of their own like *See you at the gym*.

(3) German

French

Es gibt 2 Lösungen.	There are 2 solutions.	Il y a 2 solutions.
Es gab 3 Vorträge.	There were 3 lectures.	Il y avait 3 conférences.
Es gab 2 Päpste.	There were 2 popes.	Il y avait 2 papes.

The German phrase, mirrored in English, is *It gives two solutions, *it gave three lectures, *it gave two popes, and the French equivalent, mirrored in English, is *it there has two solutions, and so on. We need this kind of double comprehension – the idiomatic translation plus the mirrored version - to create our own sentences along the same lines, for instance in order to go smoothly, and with full understanding, from present tense to past tense forms.

Mother tongue mirroring is a time-honoured technique, and is useful to various degrees for different language pairs. It provides an analysis of foreign language structures without having recourse to abstract grammatical terminology.

And now a final example from a beautiful language unrelated to English. Let us suppose you’ve come across the following questions in Chinese and know what they mean:

nán bù nán? 难不难?	Is it difficult?
hǎo bù hǎo? 好不好?	Is it good?

Is knowing what it means really enough? For a tourist, perhaps, but not for a language learners. For them, making a global form-meaning connection is necessary, but not sufficient. Learners must connect particular forms with particular meanings. They must know how this idea is expressed in Mandarin. A double comprehension is both necessary and sufficient: a functional or situational understanding of the phrase and a formal, operational understanding. The latter can be smoothly provided by mirroring the phrase in English:

Difficult, not difficult? Good, not good? This is the way the Chinese say it. Only then can we make our own questions even if we have never heard them before:

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

By making the MT dovetail with the FL construction, we achieve an uncomplicated clarity which grammatical explanations seldom have.

So we can make correspondences, and we can mirror the foreign construction in the familiar idiom. In the final analysis, the perspectival flexibility of a naturally acquired language to clarify the form-meaning constructions of a foreign language is without equal. Only an acquired language is rich, nuanced and supple enough to explain another language, to capture its fleeting dynamism that often defies analytic categories. That's why we need a new methodology for foreign language teaching where foreign language and mother tongue enter into a powerful alliance. The book by Butzkamm & Caldwell on *The bilingual reform* is about this new methodology, its theory and practice. If teachers can handle sophisticated bilingual techniques alongside monolingual techniques, of course, FLT can make a huge step forward.

