

Rising from dogmatic slumbers
How I changed my mind and started using the mother
tongue in the foreign language classroom

To the memory of C.J. Dodson, the pioneer

The compromise method: the mother tongue as a last resort.

As a foreign language teacher, I had been trained to use a modified version of the direct method, which was sometimes referred to as the “compromise method”. Each textbook chapter began with a text containing the new grammatical structures and the new words to be practised in that unit. The text was to be presented orally with books closed and explained, as far as possible, in the target language alone. However, at the back of the textbook, there was a bilingual vocab section. In class, the use of the mother tongue was to be kept to an absolute minimum – apart from grammatical explanations where it was generally accepted. That was fine by me. Monolingual explanations, some of which were suggested in the teacher’s manual, seemed to work. A compromise is usually a practical solution one can live with.

I taught as I had been instructed in my trainee period. I considered myself to be reasonably successful and enjoyed teaching. I particularly remember a lesson where, in the course of my presentation of a new text with books closed, I covered the whole blackboard with a drawing of a soap-box

race, from the starting line on a hillside to the finishing post with the winning soap box being cheered by a group of spectators (stick figures, of course). All the new objects and persons were carefully labelled during the presentation (but only after the words had first been heard and imitated). Standard presentation techniques, thus, included individual and choral repetition of words and constructions before they appeared on the blackboard, and I made sure that the class repeated each new word several times before I added it to my drawing. I usually finished off by getting individual pupils to read bits from the text out loud. Everybody was eager to get a chance to read, but there was never enough time for everybody to have a go because my presentation (story-telling and explanations) took the lion's share of the lesson time. I occasionally used the mother tongue to get to the point quicker, but I always considered this to be merely a last resort. I never thought of the mother tongue as an important positive resource because I was still in the thrall of the direct method (or compromise method) orthodoxy.

I noticed that some of the older teachers who used the mother tongue more freely simply did not seem to have the necessary fluency and flexibility to give a vivid presentation supported by mime, gestures, actions, objects and drawings while keeping up a steady flow of language. I did not see the need to change my methods. Didn't I immerse the students in the language bath they needed? Well, if you don't know what you are missing, you don't miss it. My conversion was yet to come.

The audiovisual method: the mother tongue outlawed

After several years, I changed schools and helped set up a comprehensive school – one of the first of a number of pilot comprehensives in my country. It was not, however, truly comprehensive, in the sense of having an intake of students across the whole ability range, because there was a grammar school in the neighbourhood which continued to skim off the cream.

The newly established comprehensive school started out with 14 fifth grades, and I had four English beginners' classes with 5-6 periods a week. We tried out conventional textbooks as well as some of the first audio-visual textbooks on the market such as *Look, Listen and Learn* (by L. G. Alexander) and *Passport to English* (Paris: Marcel Didier). The audio-visual method was the latest thing at the time. Its advocates claimed that they would perfect the reforms initiated at the turn of the century. The methodological compromises of the past were considered outdated. At long last, the necessary media had been made available to do justice to the direct principle, namely to teach strictly without recourse to the mother tongue, and, initially, without recourse to the printed text, either. In a foreign language teaching context the mother tongue was just something that set traps for pupils. The audio-visual method and the new teaching materials would lead to the ultimate realisation of the Great Reform envisaged at the turn of the century when the profession began to rebel against the grammar-translation approach.

Dialogues became the favourite type of language teaching text, and the teacher was expected to present them from the tape. The first few texts were omitted in the pupils' book to

prevent teachers from misusing the method and introducing the printed word too early. In addition, picture strips available in the books as well as on slides were provided with the primary function of helping to clarify the meaning of new words. Again, the teachers' books contained hints of how to convey these meanings without having to resort to the mother tongue. The textbook did not contain a single word in the pupils' mother tongue.

Testing textbooks and materials in parallel classes

The more radically a thesis is articulated, the more clearly a counter-thesis can be put forward. It was easier to take a critical stance towards the clear, uncompromising mother tongue taboo of the audio-visualists than towards the wishy-washy compromise of their predecessors. It so happened that, at that time, I came across C. J. Dodson's *Language Teaching and the Bilingual Method* (London: Pitman 1967) - one of those happy coincidences that gave my professional life a new turn.

Dodson taught two major heresies: the usefulness, from the very beginning, of L1; and the usefulness of the printed word. I immediately started putting his ideas to the test. Having four parallel classes, what I tried with one class, I could try again in another, and do it differently in a third or a fourth class.

I didn't take long to find out that Dodson's techniques worked better than those propounded by the audio-visualists. It became evident to me that if I used the printed text from the very beginning, albeit in a special way where the spoken sentence was still the primary stimulus for the

learners, it was easier for the children to imitate the sentences. When the printed word was available, there were fewer omissions of words, and I needed to model the sentences less frequently. At the same time, there was little distortion of speech that could be traced to the influence of the printed word, apart from a few instances of typical interference errors which could be dealt with immediately.

I observed similar positive effects when I used mother-tongue equivalents at sentence level to convey the meanings of unknown words and phrases – a technique suggested by Dodson which I was later to call “sandwich technique”. In this way, I reached the “fun phase” much more quickly, i.e. the stage where I could safely ask the children to act out the dialogue in groups.

I was surprised. Wasn't it paradoxical that the printed word should support the oral acquisition of the dialogue sentences instead of interfering with it, as had so often been claimed? Dodson's ideas afforded an entirely new view of the printed word as a help rather than a hindrance. And I started using the mother tongue as a regular short-cut in well-defined ways.

Notably the sandwich technique and, lo and behold, bilingual pattern drills, which Dodson handed to me on a silver platter, constituted an amazing stride forward. Students were not distracted by their search for meaning but could concentrate on speaking and using the language. With bilingual drills they quickly learned how to permute dialogue sentences and adapt them to new situations.

C.J. Dodson – a natural bilingual

“Drastic re-thinking for language-teaching methods is called for” (Dodson 1967, 16). How can someone come along and dare radically to question the accepted beliefs of a profession? I think the fact that Dodson was a natural bilingual is a clue. I quote from an interview I had with him, which was published in *Die Neueren Sprachen* (1975, 265-275):

“I was born in Germany. My father had married a German girl and settled in Germany and consequently my home-language was German. I went to school in Germany, went to the *Gymnasium* in Germany, and just as I started to learn English in grade 9 we were thrown out of Germany at the end of August 1939...Several things stand out clearly in my memory. Shortly after our arrival in Britain I was having an English lesson on Shakespeare. I was desperately trying to follow the teacher’s words, but with little success. The teacher had drawn on the board a semicircle with a square just above it. He then labelled the square STAGE, and I couldn’t make head or tail of this, until he wrote AUDITORIUM under the circle. I had been taught Latin in Germany and suddenly the drawing fell into place and I realized that STAGE must mean “Bühne”. To the observer it would be a perfect example of a monolingual approach, but I remember saying to myself at the point of recognition “das ist ‘ne Bühne”. I also asked my parents on many occasions the German meaning of English words and phrases I had heard, and this speeded up my learning of the English language considerably...German is my first language in order of acquisition but English has long superseded it in dominance...”

- Do you think that these experiences have had some effect on your development of the bilingual method?
(W.B.)

“Without doubt. When during the war I was called up into the RAF, I taught German for some time, where in fact the first glimmerings of the bilingual method came into my mind. I was training other people who already had their language degrees to make them more fluent, through re-translation procedures. We found that their proficiency could be increased vastly in this way rather than by any other techniques. This made me wonder why this was so utterly and completely excluded from direct-method teaching when we found that this worked so well with these people...”

Well, yes, every theory of learning is autobiographical to some extent.

My eureka experience

The discrepancy between what was approved practice on the one hand and Dodson's experimental findings and original teaching practice on the other hand disturbed my peace of mind. I looked into the theoretical foundations of the issues involved and discovered how insubstantial they were. Too much had been claimed for the monolingual approach; too little had been systematically investigated, let alone proved. Dodson, however, and some of his followers, did provide hard data – all in favour of bilingual techniques. I also explored the history of foreign language teaching (what a wealth!) and found interesting bilingual techniques and ideas that had been forgotten, although they had nothing to do with an old-fashioned grammar translation

method. I was fascinated. This was my "eureka" experience, a wonderful thing. The mists clear, the sun comes out, and everything begins to make sense.

My reading then grew into systematic research, and my interest in research opened the door for me to a second career as a university teacher.

The reformers of the late nineteenth century had rebelled against grammar-translation, rightly so. But they had thrown the baby out with the bathwater. For some, the mother tongue was nothing but a source of interference and was to be avoided. This is absurd, and the fact that this opinion continues to be widely held in no way detracts from that fundamental absurdity.

No one can ignore his or her mother tongue. That would be like cutting oneself off from one's own thought processes. If learners don't make the connection between, let's say, the new word "anniversaire" and the familiar word "birthday", they will simply not understand. But once the connection to "birthday" and its associated meanings has been made and consolidated, the mother-tongue word itself doesn't need to be re-activated whenever one uses "anniversaire". It can gradually drop away from the mental process, when the French word has acquired the power to refer to all those past experiences originally linked only to "birthday". It can even be associated with new, typical experiences that are not covered by "birthday". Under the influence of a new language, we add new concepts and revise old ones, in much the same way as we constantly do in our own native language. We certainly do not have to re-conceptualise our view of basic event types (food, clothes, cars, giving & taking, past & present...) and the many things that make us

human (love, jealousy, guilt, joking, rules...see Donald Brown, *Human universals*, 1991).

But why should a naturally acquired language be indispensable for teaching another language at school? To understand this I focussed my research on natural language acquisition. How could my three-year-old daughter produce grammatically complex sentences and yet not be able to count up to five? Mind-boggling. With my brother, a psychologist, we published *Wie Kinder sprechen lernen: Kindliche Entwicklung und die Sprachlichkeit des Menschen*. [How children learn to talk: Child development and the linguistic nature of man] (3. revised edition 2008).

For me it soon became evident that native language skills (articulation, to begin with) are the very foundation for foreign languages – which was completely overlooked by the teaching profession. These fundamental skills are the base camp from which we all set out to conquer new language territories. In the early stages of learning we must scaffold the new by relating it to the familiar. Even if teachers deliberately ignore the mother tongue, their students won't. It's much wiser to exploit the mother tongue through well-devised and sophisticated techniques than to avoid it. This is neither a return to the grammar-translation approach, nor a compromise method where use of the mother tongue is only a stop-gap strategy. A little bit more mother tongue support to prevent misunderstandings and facilitate comprehension is not the solution. Well crafted bilingual techniques must be combined with monolingual ones.

Desired side effects: More meaningful input; greater

coverage of language materials

Thanks to Dodson's revolutionary ideas, my teaching became so much more meaningful and message-oriented. (Together, when discussing on the banks of the Ystwyth, we coined the terms *medium-oriented* and *message-oriented communication*) I could now build on the natural intuitions of the learners instead of thwarting them, and progress was so much more rapid. My pupils were highly motivated, not only because I had rendered learning easier for them, but also because the texts I now used for beginners were much more meaningful. In an all-English approach, textbook authors have to grade their texts carefully to ensure that new words and structures can be explained without recourse to the mother tongue. I was free of such constraints. I could use "difficult" words or, let's say, past tense forms before the past tense had been systematically introduced. I could use authentic texts almost right from the beginning, connecting language to life outside the classroom, building a bridge between Germany and anglophone countries. With such quality and diversity of texts to choose from, I did not have to continue serving up second-rate reality, i.e. contrived texts written solely for language teaching purposes. I could use texts which were cognitively more demanding and which thus captured the students' interests.

At the same time I could cover much more material than was normal. When I was appointed to the *Chair of English as a Foreign Language* in Aachen in 1973, I took over a beginners' class (unpaid) at a local grammar school just a stone's throw away from my new home. I was given the first lesson in the morning, five days a week, so the rest of the day was reserved for my university job.

Experimenting with the bilingual method (1974)



Collecting ideas for a new dialogue...



...and acting it out (1974)



Pupils memorize their own playlet while the lesson is recorded by a college student



After the lesson: Pupils listen in to the lesson



I taught this class for two years, and invited my college students to observe lessons. The headmaster had given me all the freedom I needed, with two exceptions. I was to use the textbook chosen by the school, and by the end of the year, I should have covered a fixed amount of material in that book. No problem. I had time enough to introduce a lot of additional material, dialogues, cartoons (*Peanuts*) and songs (mostly the *Beatles*). The teaching stint also gave me ample opportunities to experiment with the method and refine it through trial and error. Much of the understanding comes with the doing! Many lessons were videotaped with the help of my college students; however, with technical standards now outdated. Two books came out, reporting on this experience: *Klassengespräche. Kommunikativer Englischunterricht* [Classroom talk. A guide to the communicative teaching of English] (1977) and *Praxis und Theorie der bilingualen Methode* [Practice and theory of the bilingual method](1980). No arguments from the armchair, but a debate of fundamental principles supported and followed by concrete case studies.

Live demonstration and documentation

At the Aachen conference in 1983, I organised a workshop on the bilingual method, which some 80 teacher trainers attended. I invited Stefan Eschbach, a former student of mine and teacher in a secondary modern school, to give a demonstration lesson of the bilingual method with his grade 7. The discussion after the lesson was conducted by C.J. Dodson and H.E. Piepho, then a well-known proponent of the monolingual orthodoxy. The excellent results Eschbach achieved with his secondary modern pupils silenced the critics. It also became clear that bilingual techniques only serve to get pupils more quickly to the point where they can

communicate without mother tongue support. Bilingual techniques were stepping stones to message-oriented communication in the target language. Anthony Peck from York University, one of the participant teacher trainers, included a description and analysis of the lesson in his prize winning *Language teachers at work* (1989). By that time, I had a lot of experience with the bilingual method.



Stefan Eschbach, the teacher (1983)



C.J. Dodson, Professor of Education, University of Wales, Aberystwyth; H.E. Piepho, sitting at the back on the left, taking notes (1983).



Anthony Peck, at the centre, behind the pupil (1983).

Over the years, I've given numerous demonstration lessons with unknown classes in their classrooms and, occasionally, lecture theatres. It makes me happy when after hard work the children can perform a new sketch with verve and gusto. And what better reward for a teacher than children asking after a lesson "Mr B., when can you come again?" In 2002, a DVD was produced. Bilingual semi-communicative drills as well as Dodson's sandwich technique were illustrated with different teachers and different classes in different schools. The DVD is now available in a book edited by J. Siebold (*Let's talk: Lehrtechniken*, 2004). I still teach

regularly (one lesson per week) in a local primary school.

A rebel with a cause.

Ever since those comprehensive school days when C. J. Dodson's book first fell into my hands, I have been a rebel in the field of foreign language teaching, but a rebel with a cause. That cause is meaningful communication. Dodson's ideas are quite different from what is generally understood by “judicious” use of the mother tongue, or by sensible compromise. The mother tongue is used systematically as a part of well-designed techniques, and can only be properly evaluated in the context of these techniques. Unfortunately, but typically, objections have come from some of the best teachers in my country. Their monolingual approach is greatly facilitated by modern textbooks. They simply cannot imagine they might be making a mistake somewhere along the line. Why fix something that ain't broke? However, they would be even more successful if they expanded their repertoires and included bilingual techniques.

After thirty years of keeping a watchful eye on all the literature and the research pertaining to the role of L1 in the context of foreign language teaching, I am still struck by the truth revealed to me by C. J. Dodson, who later became a true friend. I am as convinced as ever about the major findings in his book and other follow-up studies such as the one by Meijer (Meijer, T.: *De globaal-bilinguale en de visualiserende procedure voor de betekenisoverdracht. Een vergelijkend methodologisch onderzoek op het gebied van het aanvangsonderwijs Frans*. Amsterdam 1974). John

A.W. Caldwell, coauthor of *The bilingual reform. A paradigm shift in foreign language teaching* (2009), wrote an article, 20 pages long, on Dodson in the *Journal of multilingual and multicultural development* (1990).

That's why I am still amazed at the weak impact Dodson and those inspired by him have had so far on the overall practice of foreign language teaching in schools throughout the world.

Despite all their efforts, despite the fact that Dodson and others such as Meijer backed up bilingual techniques with their own experimental data, the bilingual method was rarely mentioned in methodologies and comprehensive handbooks, let alone evaluated. I was particularly disappointed when English was introduced in German primary schools and the new official state guidelines all embraced the traditional monolingual philosophy. The new textbooks for primary English to appear on the German market were oriented accordingly. Had all those efforts been for nothing?

I even met with some ostracism, albeit in a very mild form, on the part of some of my German colleagues. Over many years German foreign language experts (all of them university teachers) had been meeting once a year in the University of Giessen guesthouse and books were published regularly on the proceedings there. I had not been invited and was wondering what was happening. Only the other day an old friend of mine (now in his eighties) who had attended the workshops told me he had actually suggested inviting me several times. The organizers had replied I would only disturb the harmony they had achieved at those meetings.

Obviously a dissenter – well, dissenters don't have a sense of harmony, do they? - was not welcome.

Why are teachers & teacher trainers so reluctant to change?

Ignorance is curable, but “the great difficulty in education is to get experience out of ideas” (George Santayana). The proof of the pudding is in the eating. Teachers must try out bilingual techniques to discover how they work for them and their students.

But many have stopped progressing and have given up trying to improve. Improvement can only begin when we question what we already believe and practise; it means challenging the validity of what we were previously taught and what we still hold dear. We are creatures of habit. There is a natural inclination to keep things the way they are; to stick to the beaten track. Perhaps I was only able to give Dodson's ideas a try because, at the time, I had only had five years of full-time teaching experience and was still quite young. I had not yet become too old a dog to learn new tricks. If I had not read Dodson precisely at that particular time when I could experiment with four parallel classes, I might not have changed my methods at all.

Changing means putting your own self aside, giving up,

albeit temporarily, the conviction of knowing best in order to make room for the assimilation of new ideas. It is the only way towards self-development and real growth. It means welcoming strangeness and novelty. This implies effort and discipline, but the rewards will come. Foreign language teaching theory needs to make a complete turnabout and accept that the mother tongue is the greatest asset a talking child brings to the classroom. It is also the single most important teaching aid. This is my core message and there is no doubt about it that it is the truth.

Pupils comment on demo lessons:

Der Unterricht war schön. es war ^{Butzkamm 4}
 sehr schwer. Der Lehrer war hatte
 viel Englisch gesprochen.
 Ich fand es sehr schön. Andreas Forstmann
 3.10.1988

Der Unterricht war nach meiner Meinung
 sehr kindisch ~~gestaltet~~ gestaltet. 29. 2. 1988
 Hauptschule Brand

Ja es war anders als sonst viel besser
 man hat gelernt die Bewegungen Hauptschule Lohmar
 Englischunterricht am 8. 6. 1988

Ja es war anders und ungewohnt.
 Es war ^{interessant} interessant weil der Lehrer
 persönlich zu uns war.
 Ich finde ~~was~~ der Unterricht
 immer so wie das wir viel
 schneller lernen. Wir haben
 in dem 2 Stunden viel mehr
 gelernt als in 4 Englischstunden.
 Ingrid Kocher

Es best am Unterricht war das wir die Gesichter
 gemerkt haben. 29. 2. 1988
 Hauptschule Brand

Der Unterricht war frei und locker.

A surprise letter from my six primary school children:

