

To Therese [REDACTED]

MET
[REDACTED]

Dear Therese,

Here is the piece promised, though a couple of days later than I had hoped.

I hope it makes sense and addresses your very different readers differently.

Mario

Biodata: Mario has worked with Pilgrims for the best part of 26 years. He edits **Humanising Language Teaching**, Pilgrim's web'zine for language teachers <www.hltmag.co.uk>.

Mario's first Cdrom, **Mindgame**, with Fletcher de Tellez, was published by Clarity <www.clarity.com.hk> in 2000.

His latest book, with Garside and Davis, is **Ways of Doing**, CUP, 1999.

His next book is **Humanising your Coursebook**, ETp Delta, forthcoming autumn 2001.

Mother Tongue in the Foreign Language Classroom.

By Mario Rinvoluceri, Pilgrims.

Twenty five years ago I was one of those teachers who severely discouraged bi-lingual dictionaries in my classroom, and there were many of us, at least in that little group of off-shore European lands called the British Isles, who engaged in similar bizarre behaviours. I remember trying to get across the meaning of *although* and *despite*, using mime. My elementary students were a bright lot and one Iranian leaned across to another and said: "he mean 'but'?"

The really remarkable thing about that misguided Mario was his fantasy that his actions could, in some way, wipe out his students' natural need for mother tongue on their way towards English.

He forgot that at post-beginner level, teenagers and adults perceive

the mother tongue as enormous and the target language as small and tenuous. In fact, his fanatical direct-methodism paradoxically forced the students back into mother tongue much more than a more open approach would have done.

Was he aware at that time that the direct method theory was extremely convenient for people like him, as it meant that his ignorance of the MTs of many students in his

group was a sort of virtue? No one can do wicked things like use the student's MT if they live in blissful ignorance of it!

When we look back over the past 25 years it is clear that a lot of money has been made by many schools and a little money has been made by many teachers through sustaining and propagating the view that the native speaker of English who does not know the student's language is the teacher the students will learn most and best from. How many of the British Council's language schools round the world require new teachers to know the students' mother tongue? Ten years ago in the Cairo DTO, the UK teachers who had learnt Arabic well and who were well-dressed in a local way were referred to as "the morning ladies", since their local husbands did not like them working in the evenings. When courses had to be written, this was done by MA's fresh from UK, without an inkling of Arabic. The direct method has a lot to answer for.

It was a colleague at the Cambridge Academy in the early 90's, John Wilson, who made me aware of the professional weakness of not knowing the language of your students. He knew Welsh, some Polish, some French and was close to bilingual with Spanish. Since we had a mass of Japanese students at that school John set about getting students to teach him Japanese; to cope with his ignorance of Korean and Thai, he got hold of books that gave him a firm outline of the grammar and phonology of both languages. In this way he was able to teach contrastively, which, if nothing else, gained him huge respect from the students.

I realised that to know nothing about my students in their **Mother Tongue** linguistic context was professionally uncomfortable.

This led me to devising exercises that worked with both languages and through the rest of this article I want to share some of these with you.

Some of these exercises are for classes where the teacher does not speak the mother tongue/s of the student, while some require that the teacher should know the students' mother tongue, which the case of 98% or more of the circa 4,000,000 EFL teachers around the globe.

Sandwich Stories (for teachers of monolingual classes who know their students' MT)

You have a beginner's class and you want them to begin to listen in English. You start from the reality of their marvellous comprehension of MT. You tell them a "sandwich story" that is 90% in MT and 10% in English.

(In what follows I am teaching you Greek and your MT is English)

" There were these two *yinekes* talking about their husbands. Both *yinekes* were in their 80's, both *yinekes* were pretty *megales*. If you are a *yineka* and you have lived for more than 80 *chronia*, it's fair to say that you are *megali*.

One of the *thio yinekes* began talking about her husband, her *andra*. She said:

“ My *andras* is an *archeologos*, I am so please to be married to an *archeologo*. In fact my *anthras* is a *paleo-archeologos*.”

The other *yineka* asked:

“What’s so good about being *panthrevmeni* to a *paleo-archeologo*?”

“ Simple,” said the first *yineka*, “ when I was young, when I was *mikri*, my *anthras* did not love me that much. But now I am very *megali*, my *paleo-archeologos* loves me to distraction! “

How do you feel after your “sandwich read”? For some readers hearing the story would have made it easier. For strongly visual people it is stronger on the page.

Could there be a more natural way of leading students from the sunshine of mother tongue into the mists of the target language?

The text above was aimed at you, but this technique is brilliant at pre-school and primary level, with appropriate texts. (on pre-primary use of the technique see the July 2000 issue of **Humanising Language Teaching** at <www.hltmag.co.uk>, the article by Juan Uribe.)

Translating letters (for a multilingual class working in an English speaking country. The teacher does not need to speak the students’ MT’s.)

Ask your students to choose a couple of e-mails/postcards/ letters that they have received recently from their home countries or ones they are about to send.

They translate these into English to share with the rest of the class.

You take these texts in and query or correct the language. Students then write a fair copy, incorporating your emendations. (No student wants her classmates to meet her granny via wobbly English)

The students exchange letters and you can hear a pin drop as they read. They are socialising their love of their families and their homesickness. I have rarely had better reading comprehension classes than around translations of students’ letters home. Only try this activity once a group is warmed-up and once a climate of trust has developed.

Excuses (the activity is suitable for a monolingual class or a multilingual ones- the teacher does not need to know the students’ MT)

If you have a teenage class ask them to bring to mind all the excuses they have ever used to explain away homework not done. If you are teaching adults ask them to think of all the excuses they have heard of made to spouses.

Ask each student to prepare ten slips of paper.

On the first slip they write an excuse in English

On the second a **different excuse** in MT

On the third a **different excuse** in English. etc....

So each student ends up with ten different excuses, five in MT and five in English.

Ask the students to get up and move around. They read their slips of paper to each other and a pair may swap slips if they find their partner has written the same idea in another language. The aim of the game is get rid of all the slips one has written oneself.

(In a multi-mother-tongue group people will first talk to people they share an MT with and then will find themselves translating their MT sentences into English for the benefit of partners who do not speak their MT.)

This is a marvellous creativity and contrastive language exercise.

Bi-lingual Vocabulary Tennis (this activity is for monolingual classes where the teacher has some knowledge of the students' mother tongue.

You want the students to revise lexis they have recently met in the coursebook. Put the words chosen up on the board.

Demonstrate the activity with a volunteer student:

You: (using a word from the board)

butterfly

Volunteer:

butterfly

farfalla (Italian)

You:

farfalla

zanzara

Volunteer:

zanzara

mosquito etc.....

Pair the students and get them working on the words on the board after the fashion demonstrated.

Semantic Flip-flops (Ok in both a monolingual and multilingual class- richer in a monolingual class if the teacher does know the students' MT)

Dictate these sentences and ask the students to take them down in mother tongue only:

1. *I don't like you because I work with you.*
2. *She was relieved by his appearance this morning.*

3. (N. Paper headline) **Prostitutes appeal to Pope.**
4. **Child teaching expert to speak.**
5. *It was a great experience for me to forget.*
6. *Tell me about a person you knew as a child.*
7. *I have to admit he looked better than I did.*
8. *Is the dog tiring?*
9. *People in Devon take life slowly.*
10. *Jennifer spends more than she thinks*
11. *Fruit flies like a banana.*
12. *I don't like a lot of people.*

Group the students in fours to compare their translations

In a multilingual class, have groups of same MT and an international group for the language isolates.

It takes a moment in most classes for the students to realise that all the English sentences are ambiguous. When they do, the level of noise goes up and a sort of linguistic excitement grips most groups. There are, however, very logically-mathematically inclined students who find the exercise superficial, concerned as it is with a mere code, a mere form.

All the sentences above offer a choice of meanings. Here is a key:

1. Is it a liking for you, or a disliking?
2. His arrival or how he looked?
3. 'appeal' can mean 'attract' or 'ask for some one's help'.
4. Is 'teaching' a present continuous of the verb or the second part of a two part adjective?
5. Is amnesia the experience, or is she surprised at forgetting something she likes?
6. Were you a child, or was the person?
7. Appearance or searching?
8. Is the verb transitive or intransitive?
9. Are Devon people leisurely folk, or slow killers?
10. Does Jennifer underestimate her spending, or is she faster at spending than at thinking?
11. Is 'flies' a noun or a verb?
12. I don't much like people or I don't like too many people at once.

Semantic flip-flops is a useful exercise with advanced classes who think most things have one answer and are a bit over-serious about language. The beauty of the activity is that a given sentence like *that's a dangerous medicine cupboard* can equally well mean that the cupboard is dangerous or the medicine. Two students can have different takes on the sentence and both be 100% correct.

The above exercises are a small sample of the bi-lingual exercises you will find in the book that Sheelagh Deller and I are preparing for publication by ETp Delta, in the autumn of 2001. We hope that this modest, highly practical collection of activities will open the way to the development of a whole new area of methodology, an area

based on the simple notion that since MT and TL are both frequently present in the learners' minds they should also be present in the learning activities the class engages in.

We hope that traditional Grammar-Translation teachers in places like China will find new, fun ways of doing what they have always done, that is to say work on the two languages in parallel.

We also hope that UK and US direct method teachers, nomading all over the globe, will find relief in acknowledging and saluting their students' mother tongues.

Sheelagh and I feel strongly that using the mother tongue in a judicious and highly technical way in the EFL classroom allows the fullness of the learner's language intelligence to be brought into play. By excluding the MT we feel there is a risk of partly alienating the student and reducing her mind's openness to pleasurable and creative play, which is essential to fast and deep learning. We would suggest that in an activity like *Semantic Flip-flops* the learner is deploying much of her specifically linguistic intelligence, a intelligence mainly focused on form rather than content, on signifier rather than signified, on code rather than the message the code carries.

If and when and how MT should be encouraged/allowed/ tolerated in the EFL classroom is clearly an open question, however much Sheelagh Deller and I may feel committed to one view, the view expressed in this article.

It would be marvellous if you wrote to MET expressing your views on this topic.

I know Therese, the editor, is keen to get as much dialogue going as possible.

Alternatively you could write to me at , < mario@pilgrims.co.uk >, or at Pilgrims House/ Orchard Street/Canterbury CT2 8 BF / UK.