

Sub May 1997

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cc Glen

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To Ken [redacted]
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From Mario Rinvolucri
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Dear Ken,

On my April tour of Brazil I worked with a number of your readers at Sao Paulo and Poc,os de Caldas Chapter meetings. It is under the influence of these rather happy days that I would like to send you a contribution for the Newsletter. How about something that follows on from the Ana Beatriz Barbosa de Souza article that you published in the December 1996 issue? I have long felt that the systematic attempt to try and root out all translation thought from beginner teaching is absurd. Whatever the teacher does the students have constant internal recourse to L1. Why should the teacher not go with the student flow? Hence the enclosed article: TWO TRANSLATION EXERCISES FOR BEGINNERS.

Some magazines I write for are happy to offer Pilgrims some advertising space as a quid pro quo for an article. Do you do this? We would want to advertise our January 1998 TT courses.

Yours sincerely,

Mario Rinvolucri

Bio-data

Mario Rinvolucri works for Pilgrims, one of the main TT and EFL writing centres in UK. His recent books include LETTERS, OUP, with Burbidge, Levy and Gray and MORE GRAMMAR GAMES with Davis. He has a book on student process due out with Cambridge in 1998, with Davis and Garside.

TWO TRANSLATION EXERCISES FOR BEGINNERS

Mario Rinvolucri, Pilgrims.

I was really interested to read the article by Ana Beatriz Barbosa de Souza in the December 1996 issue of the BrasTesol Newsletter which argues strongly in favour of offering beginner students the chance to do some comparing of L1 and L2 in official

class time. It goes without saying that over the past 30 years beginner learners have done plenty of mental translation even in classes where the word "translation" was firmly taboo. Maybe it is time that some of us vigorously challenged the direct method orthodoxy.

My own feeling is that by outlawing translation from her classroom the teacher may well be encouraging a longer period of dependence on L1 than would be the case if she used L1 as an initial, temporary crutch. In this article I want to introduce you to two activities that use L1 as the kicking off ground for ever more sustained and intensive use of L2. The mother tongue serves as the launching pad for the rocket of the target language in both these exercises.

1. Mixed language reading texts.

In the text that follows I am assuming that your mother tongue is English and that you are a complete beginner in modern Greek. Read the mixed text through and enjoy understanding words you do not yet know!

The Barbarians come in the night....

When the telephone kudinisi in the middle of the night, something unusual is happening. It was just such a tilefonima that woke me up at dawn on the 21st of April, 1967. From the other end of the telephone gramis the journalist, George Papachristophilou, told me in a trembling foni :

" There's been a coup- there are tanks everywhere and they are surrounding everything- leave your spiti- if you stay in your spiti they'll get you. "

" Are you serious? " I rotisa him.

" Ne, I tell you, I can see rifles, machine guns, helmets, soldiers, get out while you can! " I put the tilefono down and stayed silent for some seconds. Then I began dialling the arithmus of friends. All telephone gramis to the city kentro has been cut off.

Some of the tilefona in the suburbs were still answering. I managed to speak to a very few of my filus and tell them the terrible news.

By now my yineka, beside me in the bed, had woken up. As she got my clothes together she rotuse me :

" ? "

(taken from Vocabulary, Morgan and Rinvolucris, Oxford, 1986)

Until you read this piece you probably did not know that SPITI means home or house and that to say "yes" people in Athens say NE ! How well do you like your speaking FONI?

If you are married you are either somebody's YINEKA or some one is yours- the word can't mean husband because of the "she " in the last sentence of the passage.

Because you are complete beginner in Greek the main meaning structure is given to you in L1 (in this case English), with only one word per dozen in Greek. Gradually, were you to read on, more and more of the words would be in Greek but so placed as to the guessable from the context and from the Greek words you already know.

This exercise is so obvious that I cannot make out why it has not been taken up by language teachers and learners all over the world. An example of a major success of the technique was in the hands of Werner von Lansburgh who wrote DEAR DOOSIE which was on sale from all station book kiosks in Germany in the late 80's. The aim of the book was to help German speakers who were lower intermediate at English to quickly enrich their vocabulary. The book mixes the two languages but more at phrase and clause level than at word level, as you have in the English-Greek text above.

A SERIOUS PROPOSAL

Why don't you focus on the Brazilian teenage market and produce a mixed language text to teach them more English, fast, painlessly and lazily? You could end up with a pedagogical best seller on your hands- the potential teenage market in Brazil is huge and mixed language is an obvious aid to learning.

2. Student letters to the teacher using both languages

When children are in an L2 situation and picking up the L2 naturally, they freely mix L1 and L2. I first had to speak Italian when I was six because we had a monolingual Italian maid who came to work in our house in UK.. I remember saying things like this to her:

“ Mi dai l'olio e vinegar ?” Either I did not know the Italian word “aceto” or it seemed too odd as yet to include in my speech.. I can still remember feeling comfy with hybrid phrases like “olio e vinegar “.

Why not encourage your students to try out and fix what they know in English by writing letters to you in a mixture of Portuguese and English. Tell them to use as much English as feels comfortable and to write the rest in Portuguese. You reply using a mixture too, so you stay within their comprehension range.

Here is an example of such a letter, In this case the writer was a British adult who had been learning Indonesian for about 3 class hours:

Dear IBU GURU, (woman teacher)

Saya (I) am getting more and more intrigued about where INDONESIA BAHASA comes from. SAYA have the feeling that SATU, DUA, TIGA (1,2,3) are from an Indo-European source, from Sanskrit....

SELAMAT (a greeting) is clearly from Arabic. Then what about pivotal words like KELUARGA for family and NAKAL for naughty, UBI for sweet potato and IBU for mother? Are these words native to archipelago MU (your)and ,if so, to which island?

It seems the Portuguese words like JENDELA and SEPATU might well have described things that were technologically new to Indonesia in the 16th and 17th centuries, windows and shoes.

How about Dutch words? SAYA suppose BUKU (book) is one. Is NAMA (name) from Dutch or from an Indian language?

TERIMA KASIH (thank you) for reading all

this,

SELMAT MALAM (good night)

John.

(the above text is as the beginner wrote it, expect that I have added the English translations of the Indonesia words in brackets, so as not to leave you in the dark!)

The mixed language letter technique allowed this adult learner to express his curiosity about Indonesian and to use bits of the language to do so. He was able to write a simple text that both expressed his thought AND practised some of the strange words of the new language. Despite his baby-like knowledge he was able to express some real language doubts he had, adult sized thoughts.

I can hear voices raised in protest: what if he goes on writing this sort of mad language fruit salad for ever? What if he goes on using English structure with Indonesian words stuck in like currants in a cake? How can he get a feeling for Indonesia expression if his mind is still basically functioning within an English mindset and language feeling?

The fact that the mixed language text is somehow uneasy will mean that the learner will want to use more and more target language as he learns more. This text is so patently an interlanguage that no one would want to get stuck with it for longer than necessary..

There is already evidence that this learner wants to use target language grammar where he knows it, so he writes: " archipelago MU (your) " and avoids using mother tongue word order. (In Indonesian the adjective follows the noun).

My strong feeling is that allowing John to use his mother tongue to begin with is an able strategy on the part of the IBU GURU, as it will help him wean himself away from mother tongue much faster than if she banned English in his writing right from the start. There is anyway no way in which she can stop him internally using English as his jumping off ground in learning Indonesian so she might as well work with his flow.

How difficult is it for you to try out the two translation ideas proposed in these pages? Will your DOS, steeped in Direct Method orthodoxy, nip at your heels if they hear about the experiment? How do you reckon your beginner students may react? Most importantly , trained as you may well have been to keep Portuguese well outside your classroom door, how do you yourself feel about these commonsensical but heretical suggestions?

I would love some answers to these questions. Either you could send your experiences to the BrasTesol Newsletter editor, Ken Dean, or you might want to get in touch with me directly : mario @ pilgrims. co. uk or by snail mail: Pilgrims/ Orchard House/ Canterbury CT2 8AP/ UK. Looking forward to hearing from you.