Teacher Bilingualism in the ESL Classroom: A call for shock language

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Abstract: *Few of us would argue with the notion that our experiences as second language learners serve us as second language teachers. However we achieve it, competency in a second language gives us cognitive and affective knowledge to draw on as teachers. Second language competency, when achieved at an early age, may also distance the language teacher from the learning experiences of some students. Occasional language learning, or "shock language" experiences, particularly those which take place in a classroom setting, can be a valuable and easily implemented component of professional development for language teachers.*

1. Introduction

What would happen if all ESL teachers were bilingual? As a bilingual person and a trainer of second language teachers, my first reaction is "terrific!" It seems common sense that a teacher's bilingualism is potentially a valuable resource in his or her teaching. But what is this intuition based on? How does the teacher's bilingualism help learners? Does the bilingualism help in some ways and hinder in others? Are these benefits "automatic," or does the teacher have to act in a certain way to trigger them? Finally, bilingualism is a long road. If we put all second language learners on a continuum, with beginners on one end and native-like speakers on the other, we get some idea of the range of bilingual competency (Fig. 1.0).

Figure 1.0 Bilingual competence continuum

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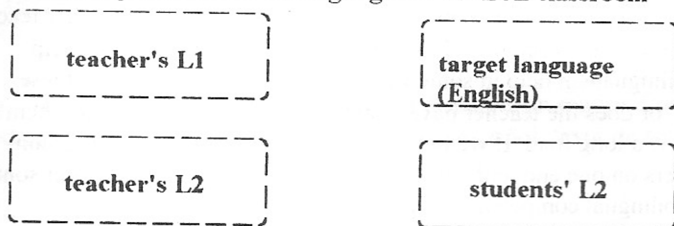
For learners, is it better for the teacher to be nearer one end of this continuum than the other? In this paper, I will look at some answers to these questions, and then look at some of the ramifications for English language teaching in Mexico.

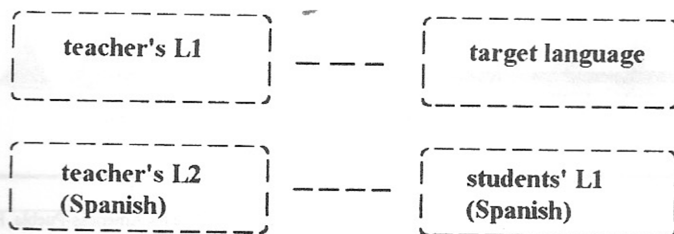
2. Cognitive effects of the teacher's bilingualism

The teacher's competence in two or more languages can effect learners in two domains. In the cognitive domain, the teacher has knowledge of two linguistic codes, one of which she is teaching to a group of learners. Depending on the languages the teacher knows, her "first" or dominant language, and the language background of the students, there are several possible combinations of teacher/student language backgrounds (Fig. 2.0-2.4). These combinations can exist in any language classroom, but here I am referring specifically to an ESL/EFL situation. Given a situation where the teacher is a native speaker of English, and also knows the students' first language (Fig. 2.1), the teacher understands certain things about the syntax, lexicon, sound system and world view of the students' language. We are able to understand the source of errors like "I have 20 years old" as interference from the Spanish lexical system, and why "the shirts whites" are consistent features of our students' compositions (Hall, to appear). Now let us assume that the teacher is a native speaker of Spanish, certainly the norm in Mexican English language teaching (Fig. 2.2). Here again, the teacher's knowledge of both codes will enable her to observe differences between the forms and functions of English and Spanish.

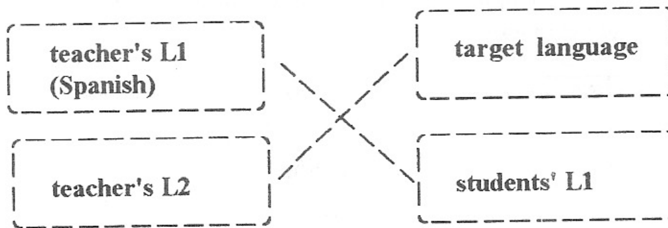
2.0 Schematic representation of languages in the ESL classroom



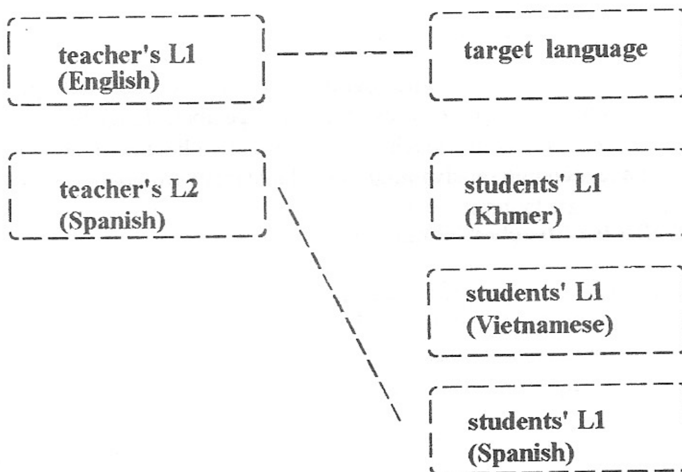
2.1 Native speakers of English teaching ESL in Mexico



2.2 Mexican ESL teachers in Mexico



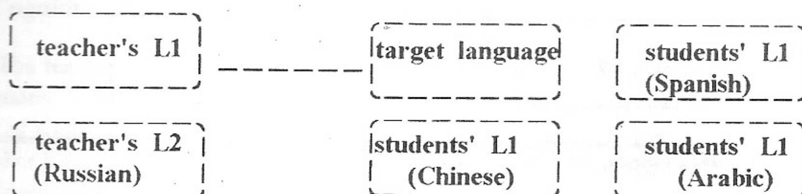
2.3 Multilingual classes, teacher's L2 is L1 of some students



The two previous examples have assumed the students share the same first language. Let's turn to one where this is not the case, perhaps a public school or adult education class in the United States. In Fig. 2.3 the teacher shares a language with only some of the students. For these learners, the teacher's knowledge of this language presumably functions as outlined in examples 2.1 and 2.2. What about the classroom in which the teacher's second language is not shared by any of the students (Fig. 2.4)? Some of what teachers know about language deals with language in general. Trained language teachers are familiar with "meta-language" used to describe language forms and functions. Thus, we can offer advice like "adjectives don't have plural forms in English," particularly where the learner's first language base makes available to him concepts like "adjective" and "plural form." It is worth pointing out that such knowledge about language is equally accessible to monolingual teachers and bilingual

teachers alike. Indeed, developing this type of knowledge is part of what teacher training programs should be about.

2.4 Multilingual classes, teacher's L2 is not shared by any students



In this section, I have examined some cognitive effects of teachers' bilingualism in the EFL ESL classroom. While some types of knowledge about language are common to all trained language teachers, the teacher who shares two languages with her students appears to have a cognitive advantage over the teacher who does not.

3. "Affective" effects of teacher bilingualism

In this section, I will consider the effects of teacher bilingualism on the affective domain. Following Giles, et. al (1980), I will assume that the "accommodation" of learners to linguistic models, in this case the ESL/EFL teacher, is generally a positive force in language learning. To return to the situations depicted in Figure 2.0-2.4, it seems likely that the bilingual teacher offers certain affective advantages to learners. In the case of the native speaker of English who also knows Spanish (Fig. 2.1), affective value may be conceived of in the following ways:

a. students see the teacher as "expert" in the target language.
b. students feel the teacher's knowledge of Spanish is useful to their learning.
c. students feel that their language and culture is "valued" by teacher.

In the case of the native speaker of Spanish teaching ESL (Fig. 2.2), we have the following possibilities:

a. students may see teacher as less than "expert" because she is not a native speaker.
b. students see teacher as role model for learning English in particular.
c. students may feel that the teacher is more capable of understanding the types of problems Mexican students typically have with English than would a native speaker of English.

Finally, we have the cases illustrated in Figs. 2.3 and 2.4, in which the teacher shares the second language of some or none of the students. In the latter case, the affective benefits of the teacher's bilingualism depend to a large extent on how she uses it in the context of the classroom. The teacher who projects her English/Russian bilingualism as a positive force may well effect her students in a positive manner. On the other hand, the teacher who consciously or unconsciously reminds students "I did it, why can't you?" may have just the opposite effect. In the case of the teacher whose second language is common to only some of the students, it is possible that language solidarity may be perceived as preference for speakers of a certain language. As an English/Spanish bilingual, I have taught in multilingual classes where Lao and Cambodian students asked "when are you going to learn my language?" Although I was not aware of using Spanish in my teaching, these students were very sensitive to the fact that the teacher had something in common with the Puerto Rican students that they could not share.

I have seen similar expressions about teacher language use on evaluation forms students complete at my university. Teachers who conduct class primarily or completely in English generally receive high marks, even from students at lower proficiency levels. Surprisingly, many students criticize those classes in which the professor does not know Spanish. This seeming paradox might be explained as students expressing dissatisfaction with being asked to do something the teacher cannot--be bilingual. But it seems equally likely that the two positions represent a single belief, something along the lines of "We want the class to be conducted in English, but it's important to us that the teacher know Spanish." Whether this is true in other contexts is difficult to determine without further study, suggesting that study of student response to teacher bilingualism is needed.

4. The teacher as bilingual learner

So far, we have assumed bilingual teachers to be like Chomsky's idealized speakers, without errors in performance. In order to fully understand the effect of teacher bilingualism on language learning, it is important to return to a question posed at the outset of this paper--that is "Does the level of the teacher's competence in the second language make a difference in terms of its use to students?" In terms of cognitive effects, it seems clear that the more competent the teacher is in her L2, the greater resources she will have to draw on in the classroom. The advanced level Spanish speaker will perhaps be better able to understand the error in the English sentence " I dreamed with Susan" as a result of his knowledge of the Spanish sentence "Soñé con Susan." Similarly, in a situation in which a student has difficulty understanding a

vocabulary word, this teacher would have the option of supplying the word in Spanish, in addition to the techniques a monolingual or less competent Spanish speaker would use.

How is this question treated with regard to affect? I would like to propose that there are certain cases in which the more competent the teacher is in her second language, the less removed she is from the experiences of learners, and the less affective support she is able to provide them. Let us begin with the observation that each learner sees himself and his experiences as "normal." As teachers, we are trained to know about different ways of learning languages. As human beings bilingual teachers are not necessarily more empathetic with their students' learning than monolingual teachers are. The fact of knowing two languages does not automatically translate into remembering how it felt to learn them. I suggest that some bilingual teachers are closer to the experience of their own language learning, and thus more able to offer affective support to learners.

Research on language acquisition by bilinguals has established that the person who is raised in two languages becomes bilingual as a matter of course (Fantini 1976; Fantini 1992; Grosjean 1982; Riley and Hardy 1990). For young children becoming bilingual presents unique difficulties, some linguistic and some social, but they generally handle the process with fewer bruises than adults. Given that bilinguals raised in this way complete most of the acquisition process by school age (the same as monolingual children), it seems unlikely that the person who becomes bilingual early in life will have any innate understanding of the process as it is experienced by people who face it later in life. Try remembering back to when you were learning your first language. How did you do it? Can you remember much that would help you in teaching this (or any language) to another person? Second language acquisition research shows us that this would be very difficult for monolingual and bilingual learners alike.

What about the rest of us, those whose bilingualism has cost us so much time and conscious effort? Certainly, all those hours of studying our second language qualify us as experts in our students' learning? I think the answer must be a qualified "yes." "Yes," because those experiences, to the extent that we are able to actualize them in our teaching, become tools for us. And "qualified" because I find, at least personally, that it takes conscious thought and effort to employ this resource effectively in the context of the classroom. In other words, there are things teachers can do to trigger this resource, but they don't come to us automatically. Perhaps this is so because of the context in which many of "later bilinguals" learn a second language. Let me illustrate with a personal example. In what I'm guessing is a fairly typical experience for U.S. teachers in Mexico, I studied Spanish for two years in high school, one semester

in college, and another before coming to student teach in Mexico. A total of three years of formal study with almost no contact with native or native-like speakers of Spanish. Although I worked hard and had several good teachers, I must say I learned far more in two months of living with a Mexican family.

Of how much use was the three years of study? The relationship between what we can learn in formal study of a language and what we do with it when given a chance outside the classroom is a fascinating one, and is an important part of several approaches to teaching; some which attempt to bring the *real world* into the classroom (Community Language Learning, Strategic Interaction, for example) and others which encourage language learning outside the classroom (summer intensive programs in English-speaking countries). One very important thing teachers can do to help students affectively is to recognize the time limitations of classroom based learning (800 to 2,000 hours of language training under ideal conditions is said to equal a score of 3 on the U.S. Foreign Institute's five point scale) (Blair 1982, x), and to design curriculum, accordingly. The other thing we might do is to be honest with our students about how we became bilingual. I imagine the benefits of not feeling pushed to *learn it all* in school are considerable for some learners. These are some ways teachers can make use of their bilingualism to promote affective learning.

Another way, one which can serve teachers on all points of the bilingual continuum, regardless of when they became bilingual, is to occasionally place themselves in the position of language learner. How do we achieve this given the time constraints faced by many teachers and the other important areas of professional development? For two years now, I have been promising myself I would sign up for a course in Nahuatl, and I am still saying "next semester, when I have more time." For many of us, this type of extended study is not practical. In the last section of this paper, I will describe *shock language*, a way that is both practical and effective.

5. What is *shock language?*

Shock language is term for a process in which people temporarily assume the role of language learners. It can be used to promote awareness and perhaps change attitudes of majority language users towards those who are not proficient speakers of this language. For example, shock language training is used in U.S. public schools to help mainstream, monolingual teachers and students understand the linguistic and cultural barriers faced by ESL and bilingual students (Croes and Smith 1990). Shock language is also a common technique in language teacher training programs, where it is used to demonstrate different ways of teaching. In this context, teachers-in-training reflect on

their experiences as language students learning by a particular method. Since the actual teaching lasts a few sessions at most, the intent of shock language is to create the feeling of being a student rather then learning the language. Thus, shock language would seem to be an ideal means of bringing all teachers closer to the experiences of our students.

6. Designing a shock language experience for teachers

There are a number of factors which make shock language an attractive means of teacher training and professional development. Shock language lessons

1. can be done with teachers-in-training and working teachers.
2. can be done in any language.
3. don't require an *expert* or trained teacher.
4. take relatively little time.
5. are inexpensive.
6. can be done in a variety of ways to fit the teacher and her school.

The sleeper here is #4. Shock language does not take a lot of time compared to other methods of teacher training, but it's not as simple as a quick language lesson and then back to class, either. The lesson itself can be very enjoyable, but the real value of shock language comes from reflecting on one's experiences as a learner and making an effort to change some aspect of one's teaching. The person actually giving the lesson does not have to be a teacher trainer, or even a teacher, but she must be a native-like speaker of the language. The following are some options in setting up language experiences for teachers.

a. **Outside Expert.** Teacher-trainer from outside the school teaches a shock language lesson and then leads learners through a follow-up session. This is usually done at the institutional level.

b. **Inside Expert.** The teacher of the lesson may be from inside or outside the school, but the follow-up session(s) are organized by the school.

c. **Teacher Teams.** Groups of teachers meet independently to reflect after a shock language lesson and discuss changes they will make.

d. **Self-monitoring.** Individual teacher sets goals for change and self-monitoring. (See Richards 1990; 118-143)..

7. After the lesson, then what?

What do teachers talk about after the lesson? Having been both a trainer and a learner using shock language, the things I remember most are listening comprehension, pronunciation, error correction, and the pace of the lesson. Apprehension is a common topic, and so is the relationship between sounds and symbols in languages using a non-Roman alphabet. One useful way of organizing this follow-up session is to have learners reflect on what they learned and what happened during the lesson which helped or hindered their learning (MAT faculty, School for International Training 1987). Learners then formulate changes in some part of their teaching. It is often useful for teachers to identify a focus point before the lesson. Models A and B above are often done with faculty members focused on the same aspect of learning and teaching with the intention of promoting faculty-wide teaching.

8. Fitting teacher and institutional needs

As with any method or technique, people interested in trying a shock language experience may want to know how long it takes and how often it should be done. In my current teaching context, I think a 30-minute language lesson followed by an hour of group discussion once a semester would be just right. Teachers in other contexts may want to experiment with adapting the concept of shock language to their own needs.

9. Conclusion

To return to the question posed at the beginning of this paper--*what would happen if all ESL teachers were bilingual?*--I hope this paper has shown that the overall effects would be favorable in both the cognitive and affective domains. By looking at ways in which people achieve bilingualism, in particular the variables of age and context, I argue that teachers who become bilingual as children have no affective advantage over monolingual teachers. Teachers interested in using their bilingualism as a resource in support of affective learning must take specific steps like the shock language model presented here.

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