EASY DOES IT: INTRODUCING PUPILS TO BILINGUAL INSTRUCTION

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1. Introduction

In which ways does bilingual instruction differ from ordinary subject-matter and foreign language (FL) instruction? What does the use of a foreign language instead of the pupils' mother tongue mean for teaching? How should a class be taught and organized to achieve a smooth transition from traditional to bilingual instruction in a non-language subject?

In the following, I will attempt to answer some of these questions. I will offer some guidelines for the single-subject bilingual class in upper-secondary school, with special focus on the often problematical process of introducing pupils to this novel and challenging form of instruction. My suggestions will be based on three years of first-hand experience teaching bilingual history at the upper-secondary level, and research including several surveys. Even though my experience and examples are from bilingual History, I am convinced that my suggestions are applicable to other subjects as well.

2. The context

In the college-preparatory branch of Norwegian upper-secondary school History is taught over two years. There are three weekly lessons in the second year, and four in the third and final year. The first part of the course covers the period from ancient times to 1850, in both World and Norwegian History. The remainder is taught in the second part. Either year pupils can be selected for an oral examination.

The first bilingual History classes in upper-secondary started in 1993 at the initiative of the Norwegian Ministry of Education, Research, and Church Affairs. Pupils were to be volunteers, follow current curricula, and face standard examination requirements. All classes used English and authentic British textbooks for the World History part of the course, Norwegian History textbooks for the other half.

The pupils who volunteer for bilingual classes have varying backgrounds in English. All have five to six years of English in elementary and lower-secondary school. At the upper-secondary level, English instruction can vary from the maximum of five lessons a week over three years to the obligatory minimum of five lessons per week the first year. The latter group, however, often includes those who have selected in-depth courses in Natural Science or other foreign languages at the expense of English.

3. Content-based/bilingual instruction - the teacher's perspective

Content-based/bilingual instruction is

> "the concurrent study of language and subject-matter, with the form and sequence

> of language presentation dictated by content material" (Brinton, Snow, and Wesche, 1989, p. vii).

The goal of such instruction is first and foremost to teach the subject itself, but with foreign language learning as an extra benefit. This language learning is incidental. Language acquisition is achieved by the exposure to large amounts of comprehensible input in the target language. There is much to indicate that this learning process is extremely effective.

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The teacher in the bilingual classroom has to find a proper balance between language and subject-matter, with the language aspect subordinate. To the extent that there is language instruction the goal should be to facilitate subject matter learning, for instance by explaining key items of vocabulary. In addition there will be many "golden opportunities" which a teacher can use to teach language. An example here could be to teach the use of sentence connectors in order to improve report or test writing. Nevertheless, language teaching should be kept to the necessary minimum. It is important to keep in mind that bilingual instruction creates a close to optimum situation for language learning. Extensive language acquisition will occur receptively while pupils are reading their textbooks or listening to the subject-matter instruction (see Krashen, 1985, p. 16). In addition a bilingual class will offer ample opportunity to use the target language productively in situations relevant to the subject, in discussions, group work, and tests.

4. Learning in a foreign language - avoiding overload

The most difficult part of bilingual instruction is perhaps starting up a new class with pupils unaccustomed to this kind of teaching. It is during the first few weeks and months that pupils give up. These problems, however, can be kept to a minimum.

It is important to keep in mind that pupils in a bilingual class are under double pressure at the outset of a course. On the one hand, they have to handle the cognitive demands of learning new subject-matter; on the other, they will be faced with the linguistically demanding task of understanding instruction and textbooks in a foreign language. These problems may be exacerbated if pupils lack previous knowledge of the subject to facilitate comprehension. It is also far too easy to forget that pupils will also be facing the demands of a number of other subjects at the same time. Consequently, the teacher of a bilingual class should plan this difficult period carefully and avoid overloading the pupils.

The first rule is to start carefully, and introduce the target language gradually. The course may start with a chapter in the pupils' L1 textbook, but with teaching in the target language. After a few lessons it will be possible to use the target language exclusively. Avoid starting several bilingual subjects simultaneously. Teaching in the various subjects should be organized to stagger the shift from the L1 to the target language to give the pupils time to adjust to the linguistic demands of one subject before being confronted with the next.

Another strategy is to keep initial lessons simple and clearly organized. If the pupils and teachers are new to each other, pupils will need time to become accustomed to a new teaching

style as well as the language. Teach traditionally, using the blackboard or overheads to start with. Lessons can be made more sophisticated and varied once the pupils have mastered the teaching situation and the target language. This period of adjustment to teaching in a foreign language will last for a couple of weeks.

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A pupil's initial comprehension problems are, especially in reading, not just a question of language. Another problem is the lack of background knowledge needed to understand instruction in the target language or the textbooks. The process of comprehension is an interactive process involving both linguistic and background knowledge:

> "More information is contributed by the reader than by the print on the page. That is, readers understand what they read because they are able to take the stimulus beyond its graphic representation and assign it membership to an appropriate group of concepts stored in their memories. . . The reader brings to task a formidable amount of information and ideas, attitudes and beliefs. This knowledge, coupled with the ability to make linguistic predictions, determines the expectations the reader will develop as he reads. Skill in reading depends on the efficient interaction between linguistic knowledge and knowledge of the world." (Clarke and Silberstein, 1977, qtd. in Carrell and Eisterhold, 1988, pp. 75-76).

The fact that reading and lecture comprehension involves both linguistic and general knowledge offers the bilingual teacher a variety of ways to improve comprehension.

The teacher can solve at least part of the language problem by handing out word lists. They are indispensable during the first part of a bilingual course. Another option is to explain key words and concepts, either beforehand, or consecutively.

Usually the most serious comprehension problems are not due to language problems. They are caused by passages requiring the pupils to make inferences for which they lack the necessary cultural or factual knowledge. Exactly when and where these problems will occur is difficult to anticipate. Perhaps a pre-reading phase in which the teacher, prior to each chapter, provides such information and activates the pupils' previous knowledge of the topic to come could be useful. With regard to background, problems also tend to appear unexpectedly. In one instance, I found that knowledge of the failed revolutions of 1848 was necessary to help the pupils understand chapters on the process of Italian and German unification. While the British textbooks expected this to be known, this topic is hardly mentioned at all in Norwegian textbooks. In another instance, the pupils had difficulty understanding a key chapter on Imperialism because of a demanding presentation of different theories about underlying causes. In order to avoid providing large amounts of superfluous information I decided to use a less demanding text.

5. Reading strategies

A potentially serious problem that the bilingual teacher should be prepared for is counterproductive reading strategies. Some pupils tend to read word-by-word and overuse

dictionaries in the mistaken belief that total understanding of all aspects of the text is necessary. This reading strategy is characteristic of inexperienced readers of a foreign language, and it often results in the pupils abandoning their attempts to read foreign language textbooks entirely (Cooper, 1984). There is good reason to believe that this is caused by the pupils trying to transfer a reading strategy inculcated by excessive close reading of short texts in the EFL classroom to the bilingual classroom (see Hellekjaer, 1992).

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In the long run, this can best be prevented in the FL classroom by changing teaching methods and by more extensive reading. In the short term, the bilingual teacher should work actively to counteract this word-by-word reading strategy.

First, convince pupils that word-by-word reading is counterproductive, and that it is not necessary to understand every single word and sentence. Make it clear that initially understanding the gist of the text is sufficient - comprehension will improve with practice. This can hardly be repeated often enough.

Second, teach the pupils study skills. They should be taught to skim read the textbook chapter first, and then to go back and read systematically while taking notes or underlining. Pupils who read and study this way understand and learn from foreign language textbooks better than those who do not (see Hellekjaer, 1994).

6. Teacher or troubleshooter?

Planning and preparation are important for the success of a bilingual class, especially when there is no tradition for bilingual instruction at a school. Faced with the unprecedented, pupils are often over-anxious and uncertain of success. They worry about whether they will be able to handle the additional workload, whether they will be able to understand the teaching and the textbooks, and whether their grades will suffer. Consequently, they will easily panic at the first signs of adversity and want to return to ordinary instruction in the L1. Once there has been a successful bilingual class at a school, however, pupils prove more confident. Success or failure in the first class may therefore make or break a new bilingual program.

Many problems can be avoided by giving pupils and parents ample information about the course beforehand. It is important to make it clear that there will be problems. Do not conceal that it takes time to become used to being taught in a foreign language, especially with a new teacher whose accent and manner of speaking are unfamiliar. Nor should it be concealed that it takes time to develop proper reading skills in a foreign language, and that this will entail extra effort initially.

Be prepared for problems. No matter how well planned and taught a bilingual course is, problems will and do occur, often quite unexpectedly. It is essential that both teacher and pupils are prepared for difficulties, and aware that these can be overcome. In this situation it is vital that the teacher inspire confidence, and assure and reassure pupils that their reading skills will develop if they just give themselves time and use effective reading strategies. It is just as essential that the teacher encourage pupils to mention difficulties as they appear, and be

observant and analytical in his or her approach to teaching and sorting out these problems. In the following, I will mention some of the difficulties I have encountered, and how these were solved.

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One of the first problems was caused by the pupils coming from up to three different classes. This meant they had been taught by three different History teachers in their first year of the subject, were used to three teaching styles, three ways of taking notes or not taking notes at all, to different tasks for group work, and varying forms of evaluation. Adjusting to a new teacher and a new language simultaneously proved taxing for many. With the first two classes it was necessary to brief the pupils on study skills, explain how the class would be taught, what was expected of them, and to assure them there would be time to adjust. With the third class I tried a different approach, postponing bilingual instruction for three weeks and teaching in Norwegian instead, using the Norwegian textbook on Norwegian History. This gave the pupils time to become accustomed to a new teaching style, the time to learn rudimentary study skills, and a much easier start to bilingual instruction in English than with previous classes.

The first part of the course is based extensively on the use of overhead transparencies, supplemented by word lists. It turned out that pupils had difficulties alternating between note taking and listening. The solution was to hand out copies of the overheads. Then pupils only had to fill in extra information, and had time to ask questions. Gradually, as they became more proficient and the blackboard could be used more extensively, these handouts became less important.

Inadequate reading comprehension was an initial problem. Many of the pupils had difficulties with the first chapters in the British textbook. They thought they had understood what they had just read, but were not always certain that they had understood correctly. There were in addition problems with particularly difficult sentences or passages. The solution was to have follow-up sessions with group work after each chapter in which pupils could discuss the chapter and work with comprehension questions. Often they could help each other, but this was an opportunity to go around to the groups and answer questions, as a rule confirming that the pupils had understood correctly.

Needless to say, good visual aids, such as maps and atlases, pictures, charts, even blackboard drawings are invaluable aids in aiding or enhancing comprehension. This is an area where the bilingual teacher would be well-advised to make an extra effort. There are a great many excellent, ready-made sets of overheads, pictures, and maps which can supplement those the teachers can make themselves.

7. Productive language skills in the bilingual classroom

Receptive language skills develop rapidly in the bilingual classrom. After two or three weeks, pupils have fewer and fewer problems understanding instruction in English, and develop adequate reading skills after a few months (see Hellekjaer, 1994, p. 95). Productive skills, speaking and writing, are another matter. Bilingual instruction offers numerous opportunities

to develop productive language skills. But, research on French immersion in Canadian and European schools has shown the need for systematic cooperation between formal foreign language instruction and bilingual instruction if pupils are to attain high level productive skills (Swain, 1985; Baetens Beardsmore, 1993).

Depending on the scope of the course, it is important that teachers set realistic and attainable goals with regard to language development. Even a less ambitious bilingual program resulting in improved listening and reading skills is worthwhile. After all, high-level English for Academic Purposes (EAP) reading skills are not to be despised. Any program which ensures the development of a skill which traditional EFL teaching does not necessarily succeed in producing, should be welcomed (see Hellekjær, 1992, 1994, 1995).

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8. Preparing for bilingual classes - preparatory instruction

Many European schools use special language classes to prepare pupils for bilingual programs, and this cooperation between FL and bilingual instruction often continues. This is an optimum solution for all bilingual instruction and will probably be necessary for other languages than English. Unfortunately, this might not always be possible for economic or practical reasons. There are, however, two ways in which schools can prepare pupils for bilingual instruction which do not require extra resources.

First, subject-matter classes should teach study skills. Most important is the ability to read and extract information from texts as efficiently as possible. If bilingual pupils are recruited from several classes this will require an all-school policy on teaching study skills and, preferably, some coordination of teaching and testing practices.

FL classes can also play an important role in preparing bilingual instruction. One way is by avoiding teaching practices which inculcate counterproductive reading. Second, FL instruction can contribute by developing the pupils' reading skills through increased emphasis on extensive reading. This, however, does not mean one or two dense and difficult classics a year, but reading programs with the material more suited to the pupils' level. It is particularly important that the novels selected are interesting to the pupils and that the language is at the i+1 level of difficulty (see Krashen, 1985). This means the language is just beyond the pupils' current linguistic knowledge, but only to the extent that they are able to infer and acquire the meaning of new items of vocabulary and structure from context. Usually this means starting with adapted readers, and moving on to authentic reading material as soon as possible. Reading programs can also be tailor-made for different classes and different pupils. Such reading programs contribute immensely to language development, improving vocabulary, fluency, ***and*** accuracy, in addition to developing high level EAP reading skills (see Hellekjær, 1992, p. 94). Not surprisingly, the more novels and magazines pupils had read previously, the easier they found the target language textbooks used for bilingual instruction to be (see Hellekjaer, 1994, p. 95).

9. Bilingual instruction - substitute or supplement?

Practical experience has shown that formal FL instruction is essential to developing high-level productive skills among pupils in bilingual or immersion programs, especially with regard to writing skills (Swain, 1985). Bilingual instruction is therefore not a threat, but a supplement to traditional FL instruction as well as a marvelous opportunity to attain higher levels of language competence.

Nevertheless, FL instruction for pupils receiving extensive bilingual instruction will have to be changed. The input-rich environment of the bilingual classrooms will replace the FL classroom as the main source of comprehensible input, and elementary vocabulary and grammar need no longer be given first priority. Instead, focus can be put on developing high-level oral and writing skills. Teaching and developing presentation skills can replace elementary language practice in information-gap exercises, and how to organize paragraphs and argumentation can replace instruction in the use of the possessive pronouns or subject-verb concord. It should also be possible to teach the literature(s) and culture(s) of the target language at a far more advanced level than has been usual. Near-native levels of proficiency might prove a realistic and attainable goal for FL instruction in a bilingual program. This should prove a challenge as well as a pleasure to many FL teachers at schools with bilingual programs.

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10. The bilingual teacher and the bilingual school

Teachers who are willing and able to teach a bilingual class are, of course, crucial to any bilingual program. The minimum requirements should be a reasonable fluency in the target language, and a formal background in the subject in question. A formal degree in the foreign language would also be preferable, but this combination will be rare for teachers of the Natural Sciences or Economics.

In the short, term it will be teachers with particularly good language skills who will take the initiative to set up bilingual programs, but the Swedish experience is that these are a finite resource (personal communication with John Nixon, Katrinelunds Gymnasium, Sundsvall, Sweden). Schools should therefore make a point of expanding their pool of bilingual teachers through a selective hiring policy, and/or in-service training. For long-term success, teacher training programs for bilingual instruction will be needed, and most probably some kind of incentive for the teachers. Another crucial factor is a positive school environment since the viability of any program depends upon a supportive, "whole school policy" (Baetens Beardsmore, 1993). In some cases, this is assured when schools see that a bilingual program gives them a competitive edge in recruiting pupils. In others, the staff or administration may simply be interested in new ideas and innovations which can improve teaching.

In other cases, success will depend upon countering the skepticism of two groups who often feel threatened, the FL and the L1 teachers. The first group can perhaps best be won over by an explicit policy of cooperation.

L1 teachers, on the other hand, may be concerned about extensive bilingual instruction harming L1 development. There is little or nothing to indicate that this is the case. There are even indications that pupils in bilingual streams do better in exams in their L1 (Lecture by Dr.

Anikó Bognár, Karinthy Frigyes Gimnázium, Budapest). Furthermore, one of the truisms of foreign language teaching is that developing advanced FL skills depends upon a well-developed L1. Bilingual programs would therefore be well advised to work for the highest possible standards in L1 instruction. In addition, care should be taken to develop subject specific terminology and concepts in both the L1 and the target language. This can even enhance language acquisition (Butzkamm, 1992).

11. In conclusion

In this article, I have focused on the initial problems of starting up bilingual instruction, the questions of preparatory and adjacent FL instruction and cooperation with L1 instruction. The need for a "whole school" policy to support and facilitate bilingual instruction has also been discussed.

To sum up, a general rule for bilingual instruction would be that what is good methodology and good teaching in History or Science using the L1 is just as applicable in the bilingual classroom. Using a foreign language as means of instruction does, however, require some adjustments. The most important is the initial necessity of introducing the target language as carefully as possible to avoid overtaxing the pupils. Another is to organize instruction to achieve the best possible combination of subject-matter and language learning within the limitations of the course, and a third the need to be analytical and innovative in teaching and solving the many problems which appear.

At present bilingual instruction is perhaps the most exciting approach to FL instruction and it is therefore understandably growing in popularity. At a time when school after school is setting up bilingual programs I hope that this short article can offer some guidelines and suggestions for doing so successfully.

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