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Parallel Text Immersion

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Parallel Text Immersion

Abstract

A new method of teaching foreign languages to beginning, intermediate, and advancing foreign language students is proposed involving reading out loud passages, chapters, and entire works of literature that are familiar to the student through required pre-reading in the students' mother tongue. A testing method is proposed to evaluate the success of the method.

It is widely accepted that immersion is the best way to learn a foreign language. Children are neuronally programmed to learn languages, and do so through listening and mimicking. After the first several years, however, learning a language becomes more difficult, but is certainly still possible through high school, college, and even in adulthood. The classic method of learning a *second* language, however, is through a deep dependence upon the written language and written assignments, supplemented by listening to tapes to develop a proper accent, and ultimately through reading of increasingly difficult text passages. This is a logical approach, given fluency in a mother tongue, and the established ability to read. The problem with this approach is that it relies heavily on silent reading of passages, and a heavy dependence on the use of a dictionary to translate difficult words into the mother tongue to enable understanding of the passages. While the occasional use of a dictionary is one good learning tool to enhance vocabulary, particularly in a mother tongue, the use of a language dictionary for understanding foreign language passages is the continual return to the mother tongue, not to mention the extensive amount of time spent simply flipping through the pages of the dictionary to find the words. Indeed, the use of the foreign-language dictionary is encouraged. But if immersion is the best method for learning a foreign language, then the use of the foreign language dictionary should be avoided at all costs, since it keeps the student thinking in his or her mother tongue, and wasting time flipping through pages rather than immersing in the textual passage.

The popular Suzuki method of learning to play an instrument follows this innate design of familiarity followed by mimicking, through listening to recordings of pieces of music of progressive difficulty, then learning the finger mechanics to match the production of the music, with solid mechanics, ultimately enabling personal interpretation and style upon the firm foundation. The Suzuki method provides ultimately a greater fluency with the instrument and music and a greater ability to play "by ear" through avoiding the dependence upon written music. As with the learning of a language by children where speaking is followed by learning to read, the Suzuki method involves playing the instrument first ("speaking"), followed by learning the correspondence with the written form.

When taking a literature course (in a mother tongue), the use of aids or synopses is often actively discouraged, since the possibility exists that the student will only read the synopsis and not read the assigned literature. Thus, the use of such aids is often viewed as cheating. Similarly, when

passages or even entire books of literature are assigned in a foreign language of study, reading of the mother-tongue translation is generally not encouraged, and would often be viewed again as a form of cheating. Books published in parallel text are an exception to this (unwritten) rule. However, since the two languages are literally bound face-to-face, the temptation to frequently glance to the mother tongue is very great, and serves as a constant crutch, and prevents immersion in the foreign language.

Part of the challenge (as well as advantage) of teaching a foreign language to adults is the desire of the student to read something intellectually stimulating. This virtually guarantees that the passages or texts ultimately selected for the advancing student are classic literature with complex ideas and vocabulary by authors such as Goethe, Flaubert, Dostoyevsky, etc. In fact, it seems to be a badge of honor in an advancing college foreign language literature class to be reading literature which is challenging even to the native speakers of the country of origin. This approach leads to a well-worn translation dictionary, and an understanding of the actual text that comes primarily, if not exclusively, from the in-class explanation and discussion of the current assignment. (“Oh, *that’s* what that chapter was about!”) It does not teach fluency in reading a language, let alone in speaking the language. It typically does not kindle a fire of love for the language or for the literature. It may more accurately be described as a “slog”, with bragging rights that “Oh, we did Goethe’s *Faust* in our advanced German literature course.” This makes about as much sense as a student of English trying to tackle Shakespeare.

For an advancing student of a foreign language, immersion is critical, without a crippling dependence on a language dictionary, but also providing an element of interesting textual passages and literature, combined with practice in speaking. How can these all be combined for learning a language through exposure and practice, as children do so successfully with language and through the Suzuki instrumental method? The method of this proposal, termed parallel text immersion, is grounded on the student first becoming familiar with the passage through quick, silent reading in the mother tongue, followed by reading *out loud* the passage or chapter in the foreign language. With this method, the student already knows the key characters and actions of the piece, so understanding every word in the foreign language is not essential to understand or even to enjoy the passage. Vocabulary can then multiply through exposure and through context, rather than laborious and counterproductive foreign language dictionary use. Reading the text out loud in the foreign language then provides practice actually speaking and pronouncing the various vocabulary words, and the elegant prose of the original author. Reading out loud is known to enhance understanding of passages (even in a mother tongue), through a greater focus on the words themselves, through the muscular action of the vocal apparatus, and the ability to hear (one’s own voice) speaking the passages. The focus on speaking *out loud* the words themselves provides a focus on the link between spelling and pronunciation, such as the difference in sound and meaning of two totally unrelated words that differ only in the vowel

combination “ie” or “ei” in the middle of the word, where silent reading might assume the wrong word, whereas reading out loud helps to identify the true and appropriate congener.

An additional advantage of this method is that texts and literature that are truly worth reading are often more accessible through reading more than once. Even as adults, reading challenging articles, literature, or the classics, we often read books only once through. The parallel text immersion method involves reading quality passages and texts (at least) twice through, and the student of the foreign language can attain a level of fluency in relatively little time that the second reading (*out loud*) in the foreign language is more insightful than the original (silent) reading in the mother tongue. The reality of this experience comes in large part through reading out loud, with emphasis of the tone and emotion of the conversation or character being read, where the student becomes essentially an actor in a play, reading the work out loud. For longer works, especially full-length volumes including classic novels, alternating chapter-by-chapter is recommended. Thus, each individual chapter should be read in the mother tongue, followed by reading out loud in the foreign language.

In terms of in-class discussion and testing, all may take place, as level-appropriate, in the foreign language. The difference is that all of the students will know the action and ideas of the work from the get-go through the mother tongue reading, then the learning in the foreign language may take place unimpeded by a limited vocabulary. Rather, the vocabulary can expand exponentially through context and repeated exposure, through the immersion.

The level of text selected can certainly vary depending upon the age and language ability/level of the student. Texts or passages could be selected from children’s books when appropriate, including the popular Harry Potter series of seven books, which remarkably grow in complexity with each volume, not only thematically, but also with complexity of grammar and vocabulary. These volumes, at least to some extent, serve to be age-appropriate to the reader of similar age to the protagonists as they grow from pre-teen through adolescence and into adulthood. And while it is possible to select a text that is truly too difficult even for the parallel text immersion method, there is much more latitude in selection simply because the student does not absolutely have to understand everything in the foreign language, precisely because they already know the story line. Indeed, it is helpful to have in balance some language that is challenging to the student, so that reading through the passages (out loud) and knowing generally what the passage is about, it is possible to increase the complexity of language skills. Of course, when truly desired, it is always possible to refer back to the original mother tongue, paragraph by paragraph, sentence by sentence, for exceptionally difficult passages and concepts. When these sections are identified and resolved, then the passages and entire text may be read again (and again) in the foreign language to solidify the vocabulary and particular forms of expression. When this level of competence is obtained, which can be as soon as the first reading in the foreign language depending upon the experience, then re-reading the text becomes as watching a favorite play or

movie, with an ability to admire the character development, the twists of plot, and the unique manner of expression of the original author.

The testing of the method is proposed to be through either different classrooms of the same level, high school or college, where one course is taught through traditional methods of encouraging the use of the dictionary, and the students in the parallel text immersion test component are required to obtain both the mother tongue version and the foreign language version of the pieces to be studied, and are to be instructed to read the mother tongue first to become familiar with the characters, action and plot development. Thereafter the students should read the foreign language text *out loud*, and should be discouraged from consulting the mother tongue version except in the case of more challenging passages, and then to return to the foreign language. Both standardized and class/instructor-specific examinations will be employed at the end of the session (semester) to gauge the success of the students in advancing the foreign language. Testing will also include a questionnaire to confirm that the students followed the protocol of the class, and this portion may be anonymous to encourage full honesty.