

"Bilingue à dix ans ! Plaidoyer pour l'apprentissage précoce", by Aries Roessler

- English Summary

BILINGUAL AT AGE TEN ! A PLEA FOR EARLY LANGUAGE LEARNING.

In the introduction, the author assesses the situation of language learning in most European countries: after many years of studying foreign languages at school, students have reached a very limited level. They cannot speak the language fluently, and when they try, it is difficult to understand them because of their faulty grammar and their accent. They are also unable to watch a film in a foreign language or grasp the details of the news. They do get the general idea of what they have read but writing a coherent and correct commentary, essay, or letter is beyond their reach. This is a very bitter assessment, considering the enormous investment of energy, time, and public money devoted to reaching the goal of fluency in a foreign language.

This situation is due to many factors: first, children start learning far too late, generally around age 12; the teaching methods are mainly based on learning vocabulary and grammar; and finally, the teachers are not native speakers.

In Switzerland, the first foreign language learned in public schools should be either German or French, to take into account the language diversity of the country. It is of course essential to learn English also, as soon as the second language is mastered.

The author then reviews her own career as mother and teacher. Having become bilingual (English/French) in childhood and learned German in her teens, she first studied political science and worked in that field. She raised her children to speak two languages from the start. She then decided to embark on a teaching career and obtained a MA in French, English, and German language and literature. She taught German as a foreign language for 16 years at the upper high-school level. Finally, disheartened at the failure of the approach and the methods, the author was forced to admit that her pupils weren't learning to speak and had no intention of doing so. They just wanted to pass the Baccalaureate examination for which they needed, among other skills, to master indirect speech (in writing) and 2500 words of vocabulary. Goethe and Schiller were also part of the curriculum, generally read secretly in translation. The official description of the oral requirements to pass the examination was a hoax. None of the pupils ever came near them, but they did get their Baccalaureate. Practically none of them ever became fluent in German.

The author resigned from her respected and high-paying job to undertake research about early language learning. She knew of course about the acquisition of another language in childhood in a bilingual family, but she now discovered that since 1960, experiments had been under way in Quebec, Canada. French was used in situations of total immersion in pre-schools located in English-speaking neighborhoods and the children became

bilingual in a very short time. These experiments were so successful that between 1960 and 1990, the number of bilingual people in Quebec had progressed from 27% to 40%.

What she also discovered was that bilingual education stimulates and develops the brain, leading to better results in mathematics, for example. It also makes the learning of a third language easier and protects the brain against premature aging.

Early Immersion - The Language Instinct

A new approach to understanding how the brain works appeared in the 1960s. It was labeled “cognitive science”. The science of language acquisition falls into this field and progressed in spectacular leaps in the following years. Everyone knows that all children learn to speak between the ages of 0 – 3 years by listening to the language spoken around them and then imitating it. The role of the ear is essential: hearing a sound is what enables the child to reproduce it correctly. A four-year old child also has an instinctive skill in grammar that surpasses what an adult student could reach in four years of hard work. The brain is like a sponge: it is programmed to learn languages instinctively from birth until 8 or 9 years of age, with this capacity diminishing progressively every year. At around age 10, this ability disappears. Afterwards, learning a language is of course possible, but requires a substantial intellectual effort through the arduous acquisition of grammar and vocabulary. The hearing of sounds has become atrophied and a native accent cannot be acquired anymore.

Just as the brain absorbs a language like a sponge, it can lose it for want of practice. A child might be trilingual at age 6, but if the languages are not used and expanded throughout childhood, this knowledge will fade and disappear quite quickly.

After age 10, at the beginning of adolescence, children develop an acute image of self. If they make mistakes in the classroom while learning a language, they are embarrassed and retreat into silence. This behavior reduces whatever chance they might have left to learn to speak.

Fears that learning another language endangers the grasp of the mother tongue are unfounded. On the contrary, the knowledge of different languages deepens the understanding of each one. And the idea that the child’s brain may be overloaded by the practice of different tongues is fanciful: on the contrary, children’s brains are insufficiently stimulated. It is true that one never reaches exactly the same level in each language, but this is not a cause for concern.

In the past, bilingualism was reserved to an elite. Either it was acquired at home with parents speaking two languages or in families that lived in a country with a language different from the family tongue. Some families were able to hire governesses who brought up the children speaking their language. Today, thanks to the experiments

undertaken in Canada and elsewhere, it would be possible for all children to become bilingual at school, if the necessary steps were taken.

Different countries, different procedures

As we have seen above, in 1965 in schools in English-speaking parts of Quebec, total immersion in French was introduced at 3 – 4 years with native language teachers. English was spoken at home. This was very successful and today, 37% of children in Quebec start school in another language.

Other countries followed suit: In Luxemburg, already a multilingual country, primary school starts in German, French is then introduced, and classes are taught in French from age 12. English is also started in primary school. Today, almost all young people are bilingual or trilingual and also speak the dialect of Luxemburg.

In France, in Alsace, there has been a great effort to introduce German in kindergarten, first at a private school level and then, despite incipient resistance, at the public school level. Alsatians are increasingly aware of the need to speak German: being close to the border, many of them can find work in Germany if they do.

In Italy, the valley of Aosta has traditionally practiced French/Italian bilingualism for centuries. Great efforts have been made since 1948 to promote both languages.

Two languages are spoken in Belgium: Flemish and French. The historical background had led to many tensions between the language communities. Today, in the French speaking part of the country, many schools are opening partial immersion primary classes with teaching in French (50%) and in Flemish or in English (50%).

Finland has long ranked high in the Pisa ratings (Programme for International Student Assessment). Swedish is the dominant language in Scandinavia and all little Finns must learn it, often starting with immersion in kindergarten. English is then introduced in the third year of primary school. Plurilingualism is thus becoming the norm in Finland and is part of the Pisa rankings.

Twenty-five percent of the Spanish population speaks Catalan. In Catalonia, total immersion in Catalan starts at age 3. Castilian is generally spoken outside school and introduced at the primary level. All children must master both languages by age 16. In Madrid, 80 schools have introduced bilingual English/Castilian teaching at the primary level.

Switzerland is a multilingual country: 63.7% of the population speaks German and a German dialect, Schwyzertütsch, 20.5% speak French, and 6.5% Italian. Romansh and other languages are also spoken. Many foreigners assume that the Swiss are plurilingual but this is not the case. Each part of the country sticks to its own language. Even if all children must learn the other main language at school, they rarely reach proficiency. The

teaching methods are those described earlier: beginning at ages 11-12, old-fashioned teaching methods, non-native speaking teachers. There is a consensus that everyone must study English, but the results are equally poor. Primary bilingual classes (German/French) have been set up along the language border in those cantons where both languages are spoken: in Berne (city of Bienne), Fribourg, and the Valais. Especially in the Valais, these experiments have been quite successful. The model chosen is partial immersion (50% of the teaching in French, 50% in German). An evaluation of this experiment was undertaken after 10 years. It showed much progress in the second language and a positive attitude between the cultures. True bilingualism was nevertheless not achieved.

Many private schools have introduced immersion teaching at different levels. The author takes a look at a few schools whose fees are quite low or which offer free tuition: a French school in Lyon (Ombrosa), the Nelson Mandela International School in Berlin, the European International school of Barcelona (Col.legi Europa), and the Vision schools in Quebec. The objective of these schools is to achieve bilingualism by age 10 and they very often succeed. However, it is clear that the key to success is not only the early beginning, but also the sufficient amount of time devoted to the acquisition of the language.

The author then makes proposals for bilingual immersion teaching in public schools in Switzerland. It would seem that the country is ideally equipped with native speakers who could be swapped from one part of the country to the other and thus teach classes in their language from kindergarten onwards. The country being extremely small, the sacrifice of living away from home is minor. Nevertheless, this has never been undertaken. There are many reasons for this: the federal structure of Switzerland and a lack of cooperation between the cantons, the vested interests of the teachers who want to stay where they are, and the power of the teacher unions who resist change.

These proposals for teacher exchange could be widened to Europe. A German teacher could come to teach in France or English teachers in Italy, for example. Unfortunately this is wishful thinking because of the national structure of education and the resistance of the teachers.

In the last chapter the author suggests ways to improve the actual teaching of languages in the public school system through better teacher training, a reduction of the number of pupils in language classes, and the adoption of international examination levels.

The conclusion stresses the hopes raised by multilingualism: openness to other cultures, the retreat of nationalism, and a better appreciation of one's place in the world.