

EARLY L2 TEACHING: DISCURSIVE AND FACTUAL ARGUMENTS

Der Artikel stellt in Frage die wissenschaftliche Gültigkeit der Annahme, dass ein grösserer Erfolg durch die frühe Einführung des Fremdsprachenunterrichts in den kantonalen Lehrplänen erzielt werden kann. Diese Annahme erweist sich als ein schwerwiegendes Missverständnis der Unterschiede zwischen der *natürlichen* und der *institutionellen* Erlernung einer Zweitsprache. Es wird argumentiert, dass signifikante Unterschiede zwischen diesen beiden Typen des Spracherwerbs bestehen, die gegen die frühe Einführung des L2-Unterrichts in der Schule sprechen. Die natürliche Erlernung einer Sprache, auch die der Muttersprache, findet im Rahmen in einer Praxisgemeinschaft (*community of practice*) statt, was bedeutet, dass eine Fremdsprache in späteren Lebensabschnitten auch erworben werden kann.

Twenty years after the 'Gesamtsprachenkonzept', the teaching of L2 languages in the cantonal education systems of Switzerland remains one of the major problems in political attempts to coordinate curricula. In several cantons, the new curricula are already in place and up-and-running, while in other cantons there is still a fierce debate over whether one or two second languages (L2s) should be introduced at the level of primary school education, and an even fiercer debate on whether French/German (both official languages within Switzerland) should precede the introduction of English (clearly a non-official first language for only a very small fraction of the overall Swiss population). In view of a number of issues that have arisen across the country in the early introduction of L2-teaching at the primary stages of education, I was approached by the editors of this issue of *Babylonia* to offer my thoughts on a principle which is frequently put forward to justify its early implementation. I am, of course, well aware that nothing I or anyone else may now say will have any effect in altering decisions already made by cantonal politicians.

The purpose of this article, therefore, is simply to question the scientific validity of the claim that the earlier one begins the learning of an L2, the better the results will be ('the earlier, the better', which I will shorten to *the TETB premise*). I do so from the point of view of an academic, fortunately now retired and thus free from the constraints of making a career in a university department of linguistics, who is passionately interested in current ground-breaking research programs investigating the evolutionary origins and neurological bases of the human language faculty, the close association of language with thought, and the tenuous link between 'human language' and 'human languages'. I approach this final complex of problems from a discursive point of view that sees any use of human language as being part of the social process of communicative interaction. For this reason, I wish to stress the fundamental socio-cognitive nature of instantiations of that process in what I call 'languaging' (see Scannell, [1998] 2002). Foucault (1972) understands 'a discourse' as a body of statements belonging to a

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In the argument in favour of early L2 teaching, research into first language acquisition, the hypothesis that there is a Language Acquisition Device, the hypothesis that there is a Critical Period in early puberty, after which language acquisition becomes difficult, etc., are all used as warrants to back up the TETB premise and to rebut counter-warrants or counter-claims. The language used in argumentative discourse makes use of a range of qualifiers, i.e. linguistic expressions used to underscore the strength of the claim and the degree of certainty with which it is made.

single system in the overall formation of statements (Watts, 2011: 17), and according to him, statements are historically situated events. Discourses are constructed multimodally, i.e. not just through instances of languaging, but also through the use of a wide range of semiotic communicative activities, e.g. writing, gesturing, lecturing, arguing, pontificating and, of course, teaching. In addition to languaging, they involve posture, dance and song, pictures, cartoons, film, etc., and 'no human interaction can take place outside discursive formations' (*ibid.*). Through discourse, then, individuals come to accept (or reject) the statements/discursive events as 'true' (or 'false'), but 'true' (or 'false') not in the sense of logically or factually true/false, but in the sense of a system of shared beliefs (*ibid.*). In addition, a socially dominant discourse can be called 'a discourse archive', which, as Blommaert (2005: 102) puts it, contains 'the macro-sociological forces and formations that define and determine what can be said, expressed, heard, and understood in particular societies, particular milieux, particular historical periods'.

One example of a set of shared beliefs about language that is central to my argument in this article is that of the assumed global status of English (see Watts, 2011: Chapter 11). English is said to be 'a global language' in diplomacy, commerce, business and banking, although no one, to the best of my knowledge, has ever given a watertight definition of the expression 'global language'. Does it mean a world-wide lingua franca to which recourse can be made in the event

of participants in a socio-communicative interaction not being proficient in one another's language? Or does it mean that one can use English wherever one happens to be on the planet, which of course includes the first tentative definition? Or should not both of these closely related interpretations be restricted to very specific domains of interaction such as, for example, international diplomacy, world trade, international sporting events or tourism? If this is so, then English is definitely not a global language since, beyond those domains of interaction, one can hardly use it wherever one goes and/or whatever one does.

A further belief about English that was commonly heard throughout the 1990s was that proficiency in it is in some sense correlated with larger salaries and greater opportunities to progress in one's career. As Grin (2000, 2001) points out, this may to a certain extent have been the case at that time, but an increased number of people with proficiency in English will in the long run decrease its economic potentiality. Such beliefs about English form part of a discourse archive since, as Blommaert infers, statements of this nature could be – and still can be – 'said, expressed, heard and understood' within certain, but not all sections of Swiss society, and they are based on such non-logical premises as 'English is an easy language' and TETB.

I now turn to a brief discussion of argument-types and the status of premises underlying the argumentative strategies used to convince others of the validity of arguments. I deliberately use the term 'validity' at this point and not the term 'truth'. In 1958, the Cambridge philosopher Stephen Toulmin published a book entitled *The Uses of Argument*, in which he discusses those elements that must be present for a stretch of discourse to count as a valid argument. For a participant to set up an argument discursively, s/he first needs to make a *claim* that constitutes the premise of the argument. In our case, therefore, the argument for introducing early L2 teaching (whether English or any other language) is *the TETB premise*. In order to support the claim, we need to make factual discursive statements, i.e. we need to offer *data* such as, in the case of early English teaching, the assumption that English is an 'easy' language and that it is a 'global' language. We then need to use the data to support the claim we have made, which Toulmin

calls the *warrant*. So, a warrant for arguing in favour of early English teaching in Switzerland is the belief, not the truth, that it is an easy language and that it can be used on a world-wide basis. If doubt is expressed by those who are the intended audience for the argument, the supporters of the argument may need *backing* to counter any doubts that take the form of *rebuttals*, i.e. counter claims, on the part of possible opponents. Hence, in the argument in favour of early L2 teaching, research into first language acquisition, the hypothesis that there is a Language Acquisition Device, the hypothesis that there is a Critical Period in early puberty, after which language acquisition becomes difficult, etc., are all used as warrants to back up the TETB premise and to rebut counter-warrants or counter-claims. The language used in argumentative discourse makes use of a range of *qualifiers*, i.e. linguistic expressions used to underscore the strength of the claim and the degree of certainty with which it is made.

Toulmin also categorises different argument types that can be set up according to the degree to which the claim is verified by the data, the degree to which a warrant is required in order to verify the claim and the degree to which backing that withstands rebuttals is required to justify, rather than verify the claim. The first type of argument is thus a logical or mathematical argument, in which the claim falls out automatically from the truth of the discursive statements made, e.g. 'Socrates is a man (True): all men are mortal (T); hence the claim that Socrates is mortal is logically T', or in which a warrant needs to be made for the truth value to fall out automatically. Hence, in the case of first language acquisition, we need to allow for the fact that infants may have a genetic or neurological disability or that they may not, throughout their childhood, have been raised within a functioning social group. Given the absence of these warrants, however, and regardless of the ultimate linguistic proficiency of an individual, the claim that all children will acquire the human language faculty is the basis of the following logical argument: All infants will mature into childhood and then adulthood (T, with the proviso that they do not die before they have reached either of these two states): all children/adults have the language faculty (T, with the proviso that they do not suffer certain types of brain damage during childhood or adulthood):

hence the claim that all infants will acquire proficiency in at least one linguistic system is logically T'.

A scientific argument, according to Toulmin, is one in which a claim is hypothetically true, i.e. it requires data, a warrant and a sufficient amount of backing, generally presented within a model constructed on the basis of the data available and designed to offer an explanation for what might be true. Hence, in theories of how the language faculty evolved in the human species, we have the end result but very little empirical evidence to go on in developing an explanatory model of that development (cf. the contributions in Tallerman, 2005). A discursive argument – and the vast majority of all the arguments we are daily involved in *are* discursive – presents a claim as a statement of belief, and although it ideally requires data, warrants and backing, its ability to use qualifiers to set up effective rebuttals is more important than empirical facts and backing.

Where, along this cline of argument types, does the TETB premise lie? Before this question can be tackled, however, we need to question what exactly might be meant by 'the earlier, the better'. In the second paragraph of this article, I assumed that the claim was that the earlier one begins the learning of a second language, the better the results will be. In other words, I have been looking at the TETB premise from the point of view of the learner, not from the point of view of the teacher or from the point of view of the wider needs of Swiss society. I also took the point of view that the ultimate aim was to produce better L2 learners, rather than more L2 learners. However, pressure to begin early L2 learning within the cantonal education systems originally came from cantonal politicians in a few economically well-off cantons in German-speaking Switzerland (notably through 'Projekt 21' in the Canton of Zürich) who were lobbying on behalf of international corporations based in Switzerland and the 'too-big-to-fail' banks (see Watts & Murray, 2001), and the L2 that they were eager to see introduced was English in place of French. But were those pressure groups really interested in higher overall proficiencies or simply in a larger potential workforce with very specific types of proficiency in English? If the latter was the case, and if only English was what they required, then perhaps what was meant by 'the earlier,

If the goal is to produce a higher proficiency in an L2 in a larger number of L2 learners, the TETB premise cannot be supported at either the logical or the scientific levels of argument. The TETB premise thus becomes a claim in a discursively constructed argument within the framework of a dominant discourse archive on language learning.

the better' was simply an increase in the quantity of English speakers rather than L2 English speakers who had reached the proficiency level of C1 (near native speaker proficiency) or even C2 (native speaker proficiency) at the end of their schooling?¹ If quantity is what is aimed at through the early introduction of L2 teaching at the primary school, the TETB premise is an insignificant logical claim in the argument for its introduction, since the more children there are who learn an L2 and the longer they learn it, the larger will be the numbers of young adults with a smattering of L2 proficiency. If, on the other hand, the goal is to produce a higher proficiency in an L2 in a larger number of L2 learners, the TETB premise cannot be supported at either the logical or the scientific levels of argument. It may result in larger numbers of L2 learners with a smattering of the L2, but, as the results of Pfenninger's research project 'Beyond Age Effects' from 2008 to 2017 show, it does not result in a significant increase in L2 learners of English with near-native or even native proficiency in the language (see Pfenninger, 2011, 2013, 2014a, 2014b, 2015). The TETB premise thus becomes a claim in a discursively constructed argument within the framework of a dominant discourse archive on language learning. Within that discourse archive, it appears to have its origins in first century BC Rome in 'early bilingual education with Greek and Latin literacy skills being taught to young boys' (Pfenninger & Watts, i.p.), and it seems to have motivated 'the objective of the European Commission on Education and Culture that each EU citizen should be proficient in three European languages (Eurydice, 1995a and b)' (*ibid.*). The problem that faces us here is the radical difference between the natural language acquisition

of an L1 (or L1s) and the institutionalised language teaching/learning of an L2 (L2s). Because these two language learning settings are so different from one another socio-cognitively, it is almost impossible to simulate in the one setting what happens in the other.

From a socio-cognitive point of view, infants' language acquisition is an instance of natural learning. A new-born baby enters a languaging world, and there is strong evidence that pre-natal perception of vocalisation (since this is all it is to babies within the womb), particularly by the mother, leads to a strong post-natal preference for the mother's voice and at the beginning of language acquisition for the mother's language (see Moon, Lagercrantz & Kuhl, 2012). Once born, the baby is – to put it metaphorically – surrounded with language in interactions with family members and others, and those interactions are not just instances of play. Becoming a member of the community of practice of the family is crucially dependent on human language, so it is no surprise that soon after the mirror neurons in the child's brain² have become active, the infant begins to imitate the vocalisations heard. For proponents of the TETB premise, there is absolutely no way to simulate this time-intensive, relation-intensive social process of between two-and-a-half and three years within a school environment.

In addition, invoking a Language Acquisition Device to transform TETB from the premise of a discursive argument to that of a scientific argument does not work. Modern models of Construction Grammar (cf. Hofmann & Trousdale, 2012), notably Embodied Construction Grammar (Bergen & Chang, 2005; Feldman, 2006) and Radical Construction Grammar (Croft, 2001, 2012), argue that language acquisition is a neural process and not a result of the activation of an innate language acquisition device (LAD) that includes a Universal Grammar, as Chomsky would have it. Chomsky's argument that an infant does not receive enough primary linguistic data to account for the speed of language acquisition in infants (the 'paucity of data' argument) has in fact been misunderstood to mean that children are not exposed to enough language *tout court* to be able to reconstruct the linguistic variety they are learning. In fact, he meant that children are not exposed to enough non-grammatical input, and this served him as an argument for postulating the

¹ I remind readers here that within the school systems of the European Union seven proficiency levels were set up as goals for L2 learning by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, at the beginners' level A1, A2 and A3, at the intermediate level B1 and B2, and at the advanced level C1 and C2.

² For an explanation of the term 'mirror neuron' and its functions, see Feldman & Narayanan (2004); Feldman (2006).

existence of an innate Language Acquisition Device. Constructionist grammars are based on the plausible assumption that infants' natural learning of language is part of their general cognitive faculties, such that we cannot *not* acquire language and that we all construct the lexicon, morpho-grammatical constructions and phonology of our L1 (or even L1s!) without there having to be a Universal Grammar in the first place.

What, then, is L2 teaching/learning? Teaching in most western societies is automatically connected with the social institution of schooling, i.e. with schools, trained teachers, teaching materials, tests and evaluations of scholastic achievement, classrooms and their topography, and, above all, in the eyes of the pupils and their parents, success in terms of the wider socio-political and socio-economic framework of society. Modern curricula stress the need to 'produce' future citizens that have an ability to converse with native and other non-native speakers of the L2, to be able to read and interpret texts written in the L2 and to be reasonably proficient in producing L2 texts. Language teachers thus carry out their work within the framework of this social institution and are themselves evaluated as 'more or less successful' in relation to the number of students who conform to the requirements of each of the six proficiency levels. Let's call this kind of teaching 'institutional'. What about the institutional learners? While language teachers are constrained by the social institution of schooling to produce as many competent users of the L2 as possible, language learners may be more or less motivated to acquire an L2 – even though they have already acquired their L1 in infancy and, in the case of migrant children, the official language in the area of Switzerland in which they live, with various degrees of ease. And the larger the teaching/learning classes become within the school context, the thinner will be the spread of motivation to learn the L2. Reducing class size entails high costs for the local authorities. Natural learners learn more willingly simply because they wish to become members of a community of practice, e.g. the family, the play group, the work group, etc. (for the term 'community of practice, see Wenger, 1998; Lave & Wenger, 1991). One further attempt by proponents of TETB to transform the discursive premise into one that can be used as the basis for

The fact of the matter in this case is that language acquisition and language learning theory is in a healthy volatile state at present with human language being looked at from the point of view neurobiology, neuropsychology and neuropathology, evolutionary psychology, cognitive science, conceptual blending theory, and even archaeological DNA studies. And none of this research validates TETB as the premise of a scientific argument.

a scientific argument is to refer to the assumed inability of language learners to reach the C2 or C1 proficiency level if they begin their learning in early puberty. Although this is not clear to politicians in favour of early L2 learning, TETB is primarily argued for on the basis of a theory developed by the psychologist Eric Lenneberg, a close associate of Chomsky's, in 1967 (see *Biological Foundations of Language*). On the basis of a modular conception of the mind, Lenneberg postulated that the biological development of the brain lasts throughout childhood until it assumes a fixed state, i.e. loses its plasticity, just before puberty. Lenneberg's hypothesis of a Critical Period for language acquisition would appear to be the major theoretical basis of early language learning at school. But – and regardless of whether or not the Critical Period hypothesis is still tenable after the intensive neuropsychological research of the last fifty years – Lenneberg's research focused exclusively on first language acquisition, i.e. natural language teaching/learning. It said absolutely nothing about second language acquisition, and certainly nothing about institutional language teaching/learning.

It is quite plausible, in this case, however, that Lenneberg's Critical Period hypothesis has been misunderstood, or simply misinterpreted. If we were to argue that the brain retains its plasticity throughout a person's lifetime, which research during the last fifty years has shown to be the case (cf. e.g., Doidge, 2016; Shaffer, 2016), and that Lenneberg's Critical Period hypothesis concerns neuroplasticity, we would be missing the point. The Critical Period hypothesis states that if a person has not acquired an L1 through the

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- mechanisms of natural teaching/learning before puberty, her/his chances of doing so after that point in time are likely to be close to zero. From our point of view, regardless of whether or not Lenneberg is right about this, it again has absolutely no bearing on the learning/teaching of an L2.
- In conclusion, the TETB premise belongs less to the realms of scientific and logical argument rather than to the realm of discursive argument. There is, of course, nothing wrong with that, but it does mean that in backing the argument, one can expect there to be far more rebuttals that need to be overcome than would be the case if it formed the basis of a scientific argument. It also means that as the basis of a discursive argument it is likely to form part of a discourse archive, from which, as Foucault suggests, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to extract oneself. If politicians are given arguments from academic research that support their ideological agenda, they take these as 'facts' supporting the policies they wish to implement, and they ignore the counter-arguments. The fact of the matter in this case is that language acquisition and language learning theory is in a healthily volatile state at present with human language being looked at from the point of view of neurobiology, neuropsychology and neuropathology, evolutionary psychology, cognitive science, conceptual blending theory, and even archaeological DNA studies. And none of this research validates TETB as the premise of a scientific argument.
- I will nevertheless end this article with some food for political thought. It is significant that at the point in time at which the 'Gesamtsprachenkonzept' was written, no academic teaching and/or researching in the linguistics section of an English department at a Swiss university was ever consulted either in an advisory capacity or to offer expert critical advice on theories of language, language acquisition and language learning. Considering the fact that it was the push for early English in place of French as an L2 in 'Projekt 21' in Zürich that triggered the new approach to L2 teaching in Switzerland and all the problems resulting from it, this was a serious mistake to have made, and it could so easily have been avoided.
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