

## **Psycholinguistik des Fremdsprachenunterrichts (3<sup>rd</sup> edition)**

By Wolfgang Butzkamm

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Reviewed by Ursula Wingate, Oxford

The third revised edition of the book that was first published in 1989 benefits, as the author states in the Introduction (p. XIII), from several years of intensive observation of children's L1 acquisition. Throughout the book, Butzkamm demonstrates that L1 and FL acquisition follow similar processes and patterns, and that FL teaching should be informed by L1 acquisition phenomena in order to be effective. In the 1970s, Butzkamm became well-known through his enthusiastic opposition to some dogmatic views of the communicative language teaching method, namely the requirement of teaching the FL monolingually, i.e. entirely through the medium of the FL (Einsprachigkeit), and of abandoning explicit grammar instruction (Butzkamm 1973). These views had then dominated the FL curricula for schools in Germany, and the shortcomings of the method were experienced by Butzkamm as a young teacher of English (personal conversation 1992). The main themes throughout Butzkamm's work are the 'bilingual method' in which FL teaching draws on the mother tongue as a facilitator for effective learning (Butzkamm 1980), and the importance of communication being the vehicle as well as the ultimate aim of language learning.

The book consists of two main parts: 1) How languages are learned, and 2) How languages should be taught. The six main chapters in the first part deal with topics that were much discussed and intensely researched in the 1980s and 1990s: does using the L1 in FL teaching interfere with acquisition and impede thinking in the FL? Does the form-focused practice of language structures hamper natural acquisition processes? Does the explicit teaching of grammar interfere with the learner's natural acquisition processes? In examining these issues, the author draws on corpora of L1 acquisition data of

monolingual children, among them his own daughter, and on well known corpora of bilingual children (for instance Leopold 1939).

From the data, he shows that the use of the L1 supports the acquisition of the FL instead of impeding it. Bilingual children use their stronger language to assist in the learning of the weaker one, employing strategies such as code switching or asking for translation equivalents.

One chapter is devoted to the “psycholinguistics of language practice” (pp. 60 – 82). Again, L1 acquisition data reveals that children do practise language forms and structures by constantly repeating and transforming them; as this seems to be a natural process, classroom practice that is form rather than meaning oriented should not be completely rejected. Butzkamm, rejecting a dogma he calls “natural fallacy” (p.73), argues that language learning in the classroom is to a certain extent dependent on this kind of practice, as it is limited to a few hours per week and cannot entirely rely on natural processes. Equally, he points out that L1 acquisition research does not support the arguments against grammar instruction. In natural acquisition, much modelling and instruction is provided for the child – often unconsciously -- by the parents or caretaker.

In the second part, the author makes a number of recommendations for FL teaching, based on the data and the psycholinguistic theories explained in the previous part. Generally, he considers that the provision of bilingual teaching in a number of subjects creates an ideal environment for language learning. With interaction data from bilingual classrooms he demonstrates how natural acquisition processes set in when the focus is on the message rather than on the language itself (pp. 153 – 156). At the same time, Butzkamm stresses the importance of finding the right balance between message-oriented communication and language practice.

Based on many examples of classroom discourse, Butzkamm offers various suggestions on how the L1 should be used for the teaching of vocabulary and grammar. Two chapters (XI, XII) are devoted to grammar teaching, showing how exercises can be linked to meaningful communication. In both chapters, the author underlines the pivotal role of the mother tongue: in his view, comparing the structures of L1 and FL, which can be achieved through translations, can in many cases replace explicit explanations. The main message

is that grammar teaching and learning should be based on communication and authentic texts. In this context, Butzkamm points out that many textbooks do not offer meaningful texts that engage the learners. More appealing texts should be used, even if the result is that teachers deviate from the textbooks' rigid grammatical progression.

The book offers a thorough introduction into psycholinguistics, language acquisition theories, as well as useful practical advice for FL teachers. However, FL teaching methodology has moved on since the book's first publication, and the revised edition does not take that development into consideration. The dogma of excluding the L1 from the foreign language classroom has long been abandoned. The role of the L1 is for instance recognised in the list of targets in the National Curriculum's guidelines for MFL, requiring that pupils at key stages 3 and 4 should learn "how to make use of their knowledge of English or another language in learning the foreign language" (<http://www.nc.uk.net>). Equally, after communicative methods initially led to a neglect of grammar, more weight has been given to the learning of grammar in the National Curriculum since 1999 (Meiring & Norman, 2001). Therefore, for today's reader, some of Butzkamm's arguments state the obvious.

Furthermore, a whole body of research on form-focused instruction has been published since Butzkamm first wrote the book (for an overview see Ellis 2001, pp. 1 – 46). In the revised version published in 2002, Butzkamm should have taken into account the wealth of experimental research into these issues the findings of which largely support his arguments.

## **Bibliography**

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