

Section 5. Pedagogy

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*Zverev Ilya Sergeevich,
Uzbekistan Partnership for Peace Training Center*

CONTENT AND LANGUAGE INTEGRATED LEARNING OF ANCIENT BABYLON: ANTEDILUVIAN FOUNDATIONS OF A MODERN APPROACH

Abstract. A significant number of modern foreign language teaching practices are centuries or even millennia old. Nevertheless, few professionals in the field are actually aware of the history of those practices: retrograde amnesia seems to be a common enough ailment affecting many a foreign language teacher. The present article is an attempt to contribute to the treatment of the ailment in question by providing an overview of foreign language teaching practices of the Fertile Crescent (Babylon and Mesopotamia) and drawing parallels between them and innovative Content and Language Integrated Learning of the present day.

Keywords: foreign language teaching history, innovation, teaching order, syllabary, CLIL.

Introduction

It would not be an overstatement to claim that foreign language learning and foreign language teaching have been an integral part of human civilization development since two hominids capable of producing and understanding speech met somewhere “on the savannahs of Africa, in the Mesopotamian valley, and on the plains of northern Europe” [1, p. 43].

Throughout centuries and even millennia, members of various trades had to communicate with one another often using foreign languages. There are, consequently, very few issues still occupying the minds of foreign language teachers and learners that have not been discussed at some point in history.

Unfortunately, however, unlike physicists, biologists or chemists, the practitioners of the significantly “less hard” foreign language teaching usually avoid any sort of discussions of the historical foundations of their trade beyond what we consider to

be an artificial cut-off point (the end of the second millennium CE).

We tend to expand the claims of some researchers pertaining to language teaching suffering from amnesia. We believe that there are actually two types of amnesia that keep on plaguing language teaching professionals: retrograde and anterograde. On the one hand, there are few memories left of anything that occurred before a particular “traumatizing event” (grammar-translation approach). On the other, there is a significantly diminished ability to actually create new memories after another traumatizing event (communicative language teaching). Foreign language teachers seem to be trapped inside a Möbius strip comprised of a limited number of facts constantly reiterated in various forms and guises.

The “short memory” [2, p. 76] of their trade, while making foreign language teaching professionals “ignorant of [their] own past” [3, p. 5], deprives

them of historical perception depth and, as a consequence, of the ability to appraise critically any approach/method/technique promoted by yet another textbook publisher/language course creator as the “ultimate achievement” of foreign language teaching practice.

One of the best examples of such an approach is Content and Language Integrated Learning that can be defined as a “dual focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language” [4, p. 11].

In the Republic of Uzbekistan, the formalized advent of CLIL occurred in 2012 with the issuance of the Presidential Decree #1275 demanding that certain specialized subjects of higher educational establishments be taught utilizing English as the medium of instruction (EMI).

Since then, a lot of effort has been invested into the implementing this particular demand of the decree with direct assistance provided by major international establishments propagating teaching and learning of English language. Thus, the British Council in the Republic of Uzbekistan launched long-term Higher Education for Employability program, among whose key strands is EMI [5].

Overall, taking into account the sheer number of various conferences, round-table discussions, and expert-panel hearings, as well as practical and theoretical seminars conducted, one would be forgiven for thinking that CLIL is indeed an “innovative approach” to foreign language instruction. Nothing, however, can be further from the truth; in order to prove that we have to consider language education system of the Ancient Mesopotamia.

Main part

At the heart of the Ancient Mesopotamian culture lay the cuneiform writing borrowed by the Babylonians (the Semitic invaders) from the Sumerians (the original writing creators). The Babylonian conquest of the region west of the mouth of the Euphrates in the middle of the third millennium BCE led to the superimposition of Akkadian, the language of the

conquerors, over Sumerian, the language of the conquered. Eventually, Akkadian would come to occupy dominating positions in Mesopotamian diplomacy, administration and cult practices. In fact, it would remain in continuous use as the *lingua franca* of the region for more than two thousand years: “when the eighteenth dynasty of Egypt ruled the East in the latter half of the second millennium BCE, they did so by means of Babylonian cuneiform” [6, p. 9].

Sumerian, however, became “the language of learning” [7, p. 233], a central element of the culture of the ancient Babylon widely employed for both administrative and legal purposes as well as for the creation of one of the richest written corpora of what used to be exclusively oral Sumerian literature [8]. The cuneiform-based dyad of Sumer-Akkadian languages constituted the foundation of “*Eduba*” (“Tablet house” [9, p. 3]), a specialized scribal-training program, which can be surmised to have been divided into two major courses of studies:

- “***Akkadian for native Akkadian speakers***” (**ANAS**) comprising learning the cuneiform writing system as well as “the rudiments of counting, accounting and measurement in cuneiform Akkadian” [6, p. 10] with the overall aim being that of practical Akkadian language application for the purposes of ordinary day-to-day practices;

- “***Sumerian for native Akkadian speakers***” (**SNAS**) comprising learning of the cuneiform writing system followed by memorization of “[Sumerian] morphemes, phonemes, proper names and words both common and rare, with their Akkadian meanings” [6, p. 9], upon whose successful completion the learner would turn to “the composition of “real” Sumerian, and to the reading and interpretation of classic Sumerian poetical and literary texts” [6, p. 9].

SNAS arguably was the most important course for anyone wishing to pursue a career beyond that of mundane trade or other business practices. The most central elements of the ancient Babylonian state – astrology, theology and rites – were only accessible to those proficient in Sumerian rather than Akkadian. In

the Ancient Mesopotamia the former served as “the vehicular language for other disciplines ... examinations were largely held in Sumerian ... in short, [it] was ... a specialized schooling *in* Sumerian as well as a comprehensive schooling *through* Sumerian” [10, p. 118–119].

The proficiency in both Akkadian and Sumerian was so important that it served as a source of pride for the neo-Assyrian king Assurbanipal (reigned c. 668–627 BCE). A clay tablet with the inscription L⁴ found in Nineveh, the administrative capital of Assyria, bears the text that “was to be inscribed on a stela to commemorate the return of the statue of the God Marduk to Babylon” [11, p. 314]. In the text, the king emphasizes the fact of his having “studied elaborate composition(s) in *obscure* Sumerian (and) Akkadian which are *difficult to get right*” and of his having “inspected cuneiform sign(s) on stones from before the flood, which are *cryptic, impenetrable* (and) *muddled up*” [11, p. 315–316].

The tablet presents one of the earliest accounts of the “nature-vs-nurture” debate, since through the choice of verbs it clearly differentiates between the knowledge bestowed upon Assurbanipal by the gods (what Zamazalová refers to as “received wisdom”) and knowledge acquired by him through deliberate effort. Moreover, the text can be interpreted as acknowledging the fact of received wisdom’s being the necessary foundation for “the acquisition of more specialized knowledge” [11, p. 316], which means that the issue of aptitude was not alien to Assurbanipal himself. Despite the aforementioned facts, however, “the literary sources seem to be silent on the matter of how Sumerian *was taught*” [10, p. 119], i.e. the *techniques* proper used by the instructors throughout the lessons are not mentioned explicitly and will probably never be described in their entirety. Among the issues that still loom large are:

- the texts available (essays and dictations) were never meant to provide any data on practical aspects of Sumerian language instruction;
- viewing a wide variety of lexical items preserved on numerous clay tablets as constituting

anything close to “Sumerian for beginners” is not sustainable: the primary aim those tablets served was teaching writing, “not Sumerian morphology or syntax” [10, p. 119];

- the importance of lists of phonemes, morphemes and lexemes, attested as it is in numerous texts and by the sheer number of them produced, notwithstanding, they “are hardly any help in trying to put together even the simplest Sumerian sentence” [10, p. 119];

- Sumerian being an isolate, i.e. a language with no demonstrable genetic relationship with any other language [12], the exact approach taken at the initial stage of Sumerian language instruction taking into account the absence of any common ground for the target audience in terms of grammar or vocabulary can only be surmised.

Conclusion

Coming back to the formal definition of CLIL that we have provided above, it can be seen that the Ancient Mesopotamia’s approach to foreign (Sumerian) language teaching bears striking resemblance to that constituting the essence of CLIL practices; though the specifics might differ, the generalities remain similar.

A preliminary linguistic preparation would be required in order to attend a lesson in a specialized subject (for instance, theology). This preparation would include familiarization with the basics of spelling, new words, their paradigms, translations into the student’s native language, etc. In short, an ancient language instructor would do basically the same things as his/her modern counterpart following the advice of contemporary CLIL publications (preliminary topic analysis followed by vocabulary and grammar item selection, student instruction, correction of possible errors, etc.). What we do have to acknowledge, however, is the fact that “literary sources seem to be silent on the matter of how Sumerian was taught” [10, p. 119], i.e. the *techniques* proper employed by Sumerian language instructors are nowhere explicitly mentioned and will hardly

ever be described in their entirety. In other words, we can be pretty sure as to what ancient instructors did, but remain largely in the dark as to how they did it.

We know, however, that the foundational principle of *ordo docendi*, i.e. that of gradual increase in the complexity of material to be mastered by the language learner, was first introduced in the Eduba system. The beginning of the studies comprised the “technical stage” [9, p. 6], during which a student would be taught how to actually “produce” the constituent elements of a cuneiform sign. It was followed by his/her instruction in the ways those elements could be combined to produce the signs proper. The sign-writing stage, in its turn, preceded that of text-copying stage encompassing honing of

the student’s technical writing skills. Important learning materials for each of the abovementioned stages were lists of all possible sign combinations in Ancient Sumerian. In the course of time those lists would come to occupy a place of honor in teaching Ancient Greek Latin and (until the XIX century) even English languages [13, p. 139]. Those were later referred to as *syllabaries*.

Content and language integrated learning, therefore, is hardly an innovative approach in the strictest sense of the word. Born in the Ancient Mesopotamia, however, it has managed to adapt to various ages and at the moment presents itself as yet another option available for those actually wishing to employ it for the benefit of his or her students.

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