

Book Review

Humanising Your Coursebook

Mario Rinvoluceri
Delta Publishing
2002

Using the Mother Tongue

Sheelagh Deller and Mario Rinvoluceri
Delta Publishing
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Mario Rinvoluceri has been adding a special dimension to TESOL France Colloquiums and Events for years. At each and every talk, we have all been entertained while we appreciate his original and surprising perspective. The two books reviewed here, designed for professionals as opposed to students, contain many of these original and amusing ideas to help us add a special touch to our classes. Both *Humanising Your Coursebook* and *Using the Mother Tongue* contain complementary material adaptable to any teaching situation or to any course book. They are not printed on glossy pages with lots of photographs, but on normal paper where you can easily add your notes and comments to the clear concise instructions for each activity. My copies are now full of phrases underlined in pencil and comments such as "great idea for Thursday morning engineering students".

It is possible to grab either of these books fifteen minutes before your class so that you can start the day with something new for yourself. However I would highly recommend that you take the time to read the introduction of *Humanising Your Coursebook* at least. It is not just the usual "This book is for..." "This book contains..." pep talk you find in most teaching materials. Here Mario states his teaching "beliefs", referring directly to his mentors:

"I believe that Caleb Gattegno is right, too, when he says that students:

- learn by paying good attention in the here and now
- learn when their minds are in 'discovery mode'
- learn best when the teacher does the minimum necessary to set them on the right road."

When he says:

"I believe that Neuro-Linguistic Programming is right:

- people learn through all their senses
- the best way to teach a class is to make sure that the input and the activities are multi-sensory,"

he follows it up with appropriate exercises that really do include movement. In my experience, when my classes involve too much movement or effervescent activity, the students go off target and forget that the objective is to learn a foreign language, not simply to play the game. This is not the case here as many activities proposed are both dynamic and controlled such as this one.

Contrasting Present Perfect and Past Simple

| | |
|------------------|----------------------------------|
| Level | elementary to upper intermediate |
| Materials | none |

1. Sit with your students in a big circle.

2. Place an empty chair next to you. Say to the group, "If anyone has been to ... come and sit next to me."
3. Now ask the student who comes to the empty chair two questions: "When did you go there?" and "Where exactly did you go?"
4. The student who is now next to you has left an empty space somewhere else in the circle. One of the students either side of the new empty space starts the sequence again, saying "If anybody has been to ... come and sit next to me."

As you can see from the title of this activity, it is designed as complementary grammar material. One of the possible uses of *Humanising Your Coursebook* would be to satisfy the French obsession for grammar, by using it not with a course book but with a specifically designed grammar book. The ever critical French would also love other proposed grammar activities such as "If I were ..., I would" where they are asked to choose a powerful person (politician, boss, parent) and apply this conditional form, or his Irregular Verb Card Game.

On the other hand, I don't think the French would feel comfortable with all of his ideas. Many activities involve drawing pictures ('Writing from a Group Picture', 'Turn Text Into an Art Gallery' or 'Prepositions for My drawing'). Others involve revealing very personal information. I think that many of the icebreakers would be particularly unpopular because French people do not like to furnish personal information before they get to know someone. However, many of the grammar exercises are just intimate enough to personalize the structure without invading what students might feel is their private space. Mario explains it himself in one of the useful 'Notes' that accompany exercises, "By focusing on the social roles, students are led away from consciously focusing on the grammar structure – it embeds in their minds without arousing their defences."

The table of contents lists the activities in 8 different categories which include the usual reading, writing, speaking and listening as well as grammar, vocabulary, icebreakers and exam preparation. This table of contents is particularly helpful because each activity is classified by learner language level as well. I don't think that this is a serious problem but I didn't find that the classifications of the exercises corresponded particularly well to their content. For example 'Banana Dictation' where you focus the students' attention on listening for key vocabulary words corresponds to a vocabulary acquisition activity more than to a listening activity. The same is true for 'Punctuation Matters' which is classified as a writing activity but which I plan to use as a reading comprehension activity the first chance I get.

A long time ago, students were asked to memorize dialogues and passages from texts or listen to other members of the class read a text. These were boring activities but students were forced to leave the translation-dependant mother tongue mode and acquire a limited number of real English sounding sentences. Mario eliminates the boredom of this type of activity while keeping the efficiency by having the students mumble or say a text differently (whispering, saying it sadly, as squeakily as possible, as if they were old people, as if they were six year olds, etc.)

I especially like the mumbling technique as it enables students to leave their normal mode, breaking their habits and making them more receptive to learning. It also forces them to focus

on just one aspect of producing a text. Focusing attention on a specific aspect of language learning is a strong point throughout the book. For example, one activity deals with difficult sound patterns, such as the problem of dropping the "h" sound. 'Dealing with Hard Sound Patterns' suggests giving a dictation but asking students to take down only the first three letters of each word. Then you dictate a sentence like "Henry had a huge appetite. He loved hamburgers and he sometimes ate herring. Now, in this hotel..."

Humanising Your Coursebook will be especially helpful to me because I often find myself working harder at my students' English than they are. A great number of the proposed exercises put the burden of invention on the students, teaching them much more than if the teacher came up with the exercise. Students are asked to write traditional comprehension questions and cloze texts but my favorite is in the vocabulary acquisition section. For homework students are asked to make up definition sheets on target vocabulary like the one below.

| | |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Definition Sheet | |
| Grammar Clue: | verb, noun |
| Length Clue: | three letters |
| Meaning Clue: | a synonym of pig |
| Rhyme Clue: | rhymes with 'agog' |
| Collocates / combines with | to go the whole _____ _____ wash |
| What is it? | _____ |

This same spirit is maintained with the design of an activity that allows students to work by independent small groups. 'Text You Hear, Text You See' proposes to have one student per small table leave the room with the transcript of a listening exercise. The other three students at each table then try to understand the passage by listening to it 2 times while the student with the transcript understands by reading. The student with the transcript then comes back into the room and all the members of the small group exchange what they have understood. In my monolingual classes, when students work in small groups they speak French, making me ill at ease. I don't know if the students would use French for this activity but after having read Mario's second book, I don't think I will worry about it.

Using the Mother Tongue is radically opposed to the standard "communicative approach" which forbids the use of a native language in the second language classroom. For years both students and teachers have been made to feel guilty each time they use the students' mother tongue in an ESL class. I'm not sure where this comes from, but I am sure that it is rather silly because a lot of what we do in second language classes could be done much more efficiently in the students' native language. Of course our goal is to help our learners to free themselves from their dependance on their own language and enable them to feel at ease in English. However, how can we consider it rather cruel to simply throw someone into the lake to teach them how to swim, and at the same time think we are doing our learners a favor by refusing to comfort them and give them clear explanations in a language they understand?

The prefaces, prologue and the epilogue all defend the use of what is referred to as MT (mother tongue) throughout the book. Although interesting, these defences are unnecessary because the exercises proposed amply defend themselves. The source of many student errors is the interference of their native language. Instead of pretending to ignore this, why not go back and forth from one language to another pointing out the differences? For example,

'Contrasting Tenses or Structures' makes you feel the importance of juxta positioning two languages to develop grammatical awareness. Small groups of students are given different paired sentences such as "I've been living here all my life. / I lived there for ten years." or "Have you been waiting long? / Did you wait until the end?" The students translate their sentences on the bottom half of their sheet of paper and fold the sheet so that only the translation is visible. Small groups exchange sheets of paper and translate the French back into English. We all know that half of the present perfect problem is that its form resembles the French *passé composé* so students automatically use it incorrectly. This exercise helps them to break away from these "automatic" errors as they discover for themselves how language works.

Other proposed activities do the same thing with lexical awareness pointing out the similarities and differences of MT and L2. My students are very poor dictionary users in general and a disaster for collocations in particular. They either do not know about the existence of collocation dictionaries or do not use them. 'Collocation Networks' is a great activity to bring home the problem of words that do or do not go together. In this activity, you choose some words your students know well and then give them all the collocations for that word. For example:

Chocolate

pre-positional: dark, white, plain, melted, hot, drinking, milk, grated

post-positional: factory, money, cake, bar

or

relationship: (stable, close, long-term, stormy, loving, meaningful, deep)

They have to decide which English word it is and then imagine which French words would collocate with that word. From there, you distribute different English words to small groups and have each group try to list as many English words that collocate for their word as they can. Each small group then reads their list of collocations to the others who have to guess the original word. Then each group writes the MT collocations and the other groups must find out the English equivalents. It is through this type of comparison that students will become aware of important differences and avoid sounding strange when they speak in L2.

It always irritates me when I propose a fun activity that would be worthwhile if it were carried out in English but is worthless and totally ridiculous when the students speak French. The irritation comes when I have to constantly remind the students to use English. My students seem to fall back onto using their mother tongue too easily, keeping themselves and others from learning. By not trying to forbid the use of French completely and by providing specific uses for it, it might be possible to slow down the spontaneous and automatic use of French when it is not efficient. One of my favorite activities suggests how to help students realize when it is not necessary to use their native language. 'Mother Tongue Scribe' works like this:

1. Choose one member of each group to be the MT scribe. It could be a good idea to ask a student who is particularly prone to using the MT to carry out this task. Or, it could be a lower level student who may have problems with the task. The important thing is that it is not always the same person.
2. Tell the MT scribe to make a note of anything said in MT. They do **not** note who said it.
3. At the end of the group work, ask the scribe to give their notes to you.

Consequences

- Often if the teacher reads out the MT that was used, the students can in fact supply the English. This makes them realise that they are sometimes resorting to MT when it isn't necessary.
- There will probably be some language that they cannot translate back into English. This gives the teacher useful information about language that needs to be worked on.
- The very fact someone is noting down the MT that is spoken can act as a reminder to the group and therefore discourage them from using MT.
- The MT scribe may well find themselves translating as they are writing.

I would never have thought of the scribe technique if I hadn't read this book and this is true of many of the activities. The procedures are original and could be applied to many situations. For example, if you want to focus on a particularly difficult vocabulary list with a lot of French interference, you ask the students to prepare slips of paper, one with the target L2 expression and one with their equivalent MT expression. Give each student one MT slip of paper and one L2 slip of paper with a different expression. The students walk around the room saying their L2 expression until they find a student with the MT equivalent. The 2 students then come back to you and give you the 2 pieces of paper. I am sure that each student will have memorized many of the target English expressions by having repeated them and heard them during the activity.

I found 'Two-language Chinese Whispers' even more original. A simplified version is simply to play "gossip". You give one student a sentence. That student whispers it to the next student who whispers it to the next one only translating it first into MT. The following student translates it back into English and whispers it to the next person. The next person whispers it in MT to the following person. A final English version is written on the board, and compared to the original sentence. By retracing where the transformations came about, everyone can get a better feel for essential differences between MT and L2.

I'm not sure all of these activities would work with my students. I think that some of them would backfire and the students wouldn't get the feel for how literal translations do not work in a foreign language or they would get the feeling that English is just too complicated. Activities such as 'Telling Jokes' or 'Commercials' would not work with my students for these reasons. However, by allowing students to discover for themselves how language works most of these activities will enable our learners to have a deeper feel for what they can and can not do in English. I am grateful to Mario for producing *Using the Mother Tongue* which will enable me to canalise the use of MT in my classroom and free me of guilt for putting my finger on problems that are based on French interference.