Language Learning and Bilingual Education from a Diachronic Perspective: Two Historical Miniatures

Leonor María Martínez Serrano
University of Córdoba (Spain)

Abstract

In an increasingly globalised world, education systems are trying to implement effective dual-focused approaches that provide students with high-quality language and content learning. *Nihil novum sub sole*. Bilingual education and language learning are as old as humanity. A diachronic approach to the study of how humankind has gone about learning languages and using languages to learn different academic disciplines reveals that a *sui generis* proto-CLIL was cultivated in Roman schools where Greek was used as a language of instruction in the 1st century CE. Stoic philosopher L. A. Seneca's experience as a language learner is a case in point. As a child, he was taken to Rome by his father to receive a humanistic education where languages played a role of paramount importance. Centuries later, in Renaissance Europe, talented humanists such as Erasmus of Rotterdam learnt languages to expand their knowledge in disciplines that opened up new vistas to new territories. In the twentieth century, an abundance of examples show that language learning and bilingual education were signs of a well-rounded education amongst intellectuals and men of letters. American poet Ezra Pound taught his daughter, Mary de Rachewiltz, classical and modern languages to instill in her the sense that not everything that is worth reading is written in a single tongue. The methods he used to teach her German and classical Greek are expressive of the cosmopolitanism that pervaded his thinking and his conception of literary tradition, whilst they anticipate our current views of the communicative approach, CLIL teaching, and translanguaging.

Keywords: bilingual education, language learning, proto-CLIL, translanguaging

I

In an increasingly globalised world, education systems are trying to implement effective dual-focused approaches that provide students with high-quality language and content learning. *Nihil novum sub sole*. Bilingual education and language learning are as old as humanity. A diachronic approach to the study of how humankind has gone about learning languages and using languages to learn different academic disciplines reveals that a *sui generis* proto-CLIL was cultivated in Roman schools where Greek was used as a language of instruction in the 1st century CE. Stoic philosopher L. A. Seneca's experience as a language learner is a case in point. As a child, he was taken to Rome by his father to receive a humanistic education where languages played a role of paramount importance. Centuries later, in Renaissance Europe, talented humanists such as Erasmus of Rotterdam learnt languages to expand their knowledge in disciplines that opened up new vistas to new territories. In the twentieth century, an abundance of examples show that language learning and bilingual education were signs of a well-rounded education amongst intellectuals and men of letters. American poet Ezra Pound taught his daughter, Mary de Rachewiltz, classical and modern languages to instill in her the sense that not everything that is worth reading is written in a single tongue. The methods he used to teach her German and classical Greek are expressive of the cosmopolitanism that pervaded his thinking and his conception of literary tradition, whilst they anticipate our current views of the communicative

approach, CLIL teaching, and translanguaging. What follows is a series of historical miniatures that illustrate what a diachronic approach to language learning and bilingual education might look like.

Stoic philosopher, prolific playwright, and essayist Lucius Annaeus Seneca was part of the Roman intellectual elite of the first century CE. Like for many of his contemporaries, the Greek language was for him a vehicle of knowledge and the treasure-house of a precious cultural legacy. A biography on the Hispanic scholar reveals that:

> In his formative years, the young Seneca must have learned, if not to speak, to understand and read Greek. The teaching was bilingual and the children of good family used to have Greek preceptors. The school regime was very harsh and continuous. Seneca has bad memories of the stay with the teacher of second letters, the *grammaticus*. Seneca was close to three teachers, and all three belonged to the circle of the Sextius, which represented a school that defended a moral eclecticism of Stoic inspiration. There they spoke and wrote in Greek.

A careful reading of this luminous fragment gestures to several important aspects. The first one is that a diachronic study of bilingualism may shed light on the development of one of humankind's universal concerns. Bilingualism has an unavoidable historical dimension; it already existed in Hispania in the 1st century, and even earlier. The second crucial aspect is that bilingual education had an elitist character, even if a kind of spontaneous bilingualism was widespread among people belonging to less privileged social classes. With the passage of time, we have witnessed a sort of democratisation of bilingual education, unthinkable in the time of the Stoic philosopher. In his sixties, Seneca the Elder decided to leave the patrician colony of Corduba to settle in Rome, the capital of the empire, with his young wife Helvia and their three children. His plan was to provide their children with a well-rounded education and give them opportunities to follow the usual *cursus honorum* undertaken by the young Romans of their class and to rub shoulders with the elite circles of thought and politics of the time. It is striking that Seneca, the calm sage par excellence, feared the *grammaticus*. Despite the Spartan discipline he had to cope with and the huge effort he had to make, his bilingual learning eventually proved successful. He became competent in the Greek language: Seneca speaks, writes and understands Greek. The ultimate goal of bilingual education did not lie exclusively in acquiring knowledge of the culture embodied in fundamental Graeco-Latin texts, but in gaining an effective command of both languages which, in Seneca's case, clearly crystallised in the gifted pupil's exquisite command of the spoken word (oratory) and of the written word (as evidenced by his philosophical writings, plays and lost poems). In one of his epistles to Lucilius, Seneca, now an old man, recalls those years of his youth in which he was educated by his admired teachers, Attalus among them:

> In his younger years, Seneca had attended a prestigious school, founded in the Rome of Augustus by the philosopher Sextius and run at the time by the founder's sons. There he received with profit the teachings of several masters, whom in his old age he remembered with affection and gratitude; but for no other did he feel so much devotion as for Attalus. Epistle CVIII to Lucilius contains a delicate tribute to this man who would have charted the course of his youth. Seneca recalls with how much enthusiasm he besieged that chair, where he was always the first to go and the last to leave. Attalus used to reflect by pacing from one end of the room to the other, and Seneca would pester him with his questions without the teacher feeling sorry for the interruption. He followed the rule of always being within reach of his disciples and even of passing them by, for he never tired of repeating that the same ideal animated the one and the other: the teacher, the desire to promote; the pupils, the desire to progress. (Blanco Freijeiro, 1966, p. 57)

Seneca's education was not dissimilar from the *paideia* of his Roman contemporaries who belonged to the equestrian rank and sought to promote themselves through culture. The philosopher's formal schooling comprised three stages, as was customary at the time. Between the ages of seven and eleven or twelve, apprentices attended a master's school (*ludi magister*), where they were taught the rudiments of reading, writing and mathematics. Although some parents hired a private tutor to educate their children at home, the most common practice at the time of Seneca's and his siblings' childhood was to attend a school. However, the children of wealthy families had a pedagogue or guardian, a domestic

slave, who taught them games and sports, and always accompanied them to school. At the age of twelve or thirteen, Seneca began the second level of education (that of grammar), oriented towards the learning of Latin and Greek. The apprentices were involved in detailed analyses of word roots, stress, rhythm, simple and compound words, etc. They paid special attention to the great classical authors of the past, whose works were studied, memorised, summarised, interpreted, etc. On the other hand, knowledge of music, metrics, astronomy, and even basic notions of philosophy and oratory were also acquired at this stage. The best grammarians were freedmen, mostly from the Greek world, who enjoyed a certain prestige at the time. In the study of Latin and Greek, it was customary for the wealthy classes to follow the advice given by Quintilian in his *Institutio oratoria* I, 1. 12-13, an eloquent passage in which the Roman author argues that "the education of children should begin with Greek":

> A sermone Graeco puerum incipere malo, quia Latinum, qui pluribus in usu est, uel nobis nolentibus perbibet, simul quia disciplinis quoque Graecis prius instituendus est, unde et nostrae fluxerunt. Non tamen hoc adeo superstitiose fieri uelim ut diu tantum Graece loquatur aut discat, sicut plerisque moris est. Hoc enim accidunt et oris plurima uitia in peregrinum sonum corrupti et sermonis, cui cum Graecae figurae adsidua consuetudine haeserunt, in diuersa quoque loquendi ratione pertinacissime durant.
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> I am more inclined to have the child begin with the Greek language, since the Latin language, which is more in use, we learn even if we do not want to: and also because he must first be instructed in the Greek letters and sciences, from which our language originated. But I do not wish that in this he should proceed so scrupulously that he should speak and learn the Greek language alone for a long time, as some do; for from this stem a great many defects, whether in the strange pronunciation, or in the language, which, having become attached to them by long habit of the Greek language, also come to harden into a way of speaking different from the others. And so the Greek language must be followed by the Latin language, in order to learn them at the same time. Thus, it will happen, that by preserving with equal care the study of both, neither will harm the other.

Finally, at the third level of education, that of rhetoric, in addition to the practice of oratory (fully systematised in Cicero's *De oratore* and Quintilian's monumental *Institutio oratoria*), Seneca must have immersed himself in the study of history and philosophy. In the field of philosophy, after a previous approach to the Pythagorean doctrine and mysticism, Seneca ended up embracing Stoicism – a philosophy that advocates a life in accordance with nature guided by reason and virtue, a life devoted to study and contemplation that seeks spiritual serenity. Aware of the ephemeral condition of human beings and the vanity of all human enterprises, Seneca chose a life in which he tried to harmonise philosophical contemplation and action in the public sphere of politics as Nero's preceptor and mentor.

II

American poet, essayist and critic Ezra Pound is best known for *The Cantos*, the monumental epic poem of Anglo-Saxon Modernism. His thinking on the importance of language learning is conveyed in *Ezra Pound, Father and Teacher: Discretions*, a memoir published by his daughter, Mary de Rachewiltz, in 1971. It was a moving autobiographical account that shed light not only on her life journey from childhood to adulthood, but also on her father's personality and on her mother, Olga Rudge, an accomplished violinist. Mary's text is a precious testimony about the languages that made up the linguistic ecosystem of her childhood, as well as the learning methods employed by her father and mother to provide her with a plurilingual and humanistic education. Aware of the importance of learning classical and modern languages, both Pound and Rudge instilled a strong discipline and a deep sense of responsibility in Mary, continuously exposed her to an endless number of readings that would allow her to gradually acquire the languages that would shape her plurilingual and pluricultural identity, and provided her with learning experiences in which she had to read, translate and express in speaking or in writing, in one or another language, whatever was the object of knowledge that her

parents wanted her to assimilate. In her autobiographical text, the poet reveals himself as a father and teacher who gives wise advice to his daughter about language learning, and does so from premises that anticipate the communicative approach and the cosmopolitanism of our plurilingual and pluricultural world. A polyglot and connoisseur of a dozen languages essential to his apprenticeship as a poet, Pound was aware that language learning would eventually cultivate his daughter's communicative and intercultural competence (Byram, 1997).

Pound also knew that thinking about the world from the multiple perspectives provided by diverse languages and human voices could be extremely beneficial for the ethical, emotional and intellectual shaping of his daughter. Mary de Rachewiltz spent the first years of her life in the care of a peasant foster family in Gais, in the Tyrol, where, as she explains in her book, "the only language heard, known and mastered was Tyrolese" (p. 20). Tyrolean, a German dialect spoken in the Italian Alps in an area close to Austria, was the only language that Mary came to have a good command of in her childhood. The irruption of Tattile or Babbo (Pound) and Mamile (Olga Rudge) into her life means the arrival of other languages to her world. Mary's account of her experience with the languages spoken at home, either in Gais or in Venice, where she began to spend some time from the age of four, is absolutely moving. We witness her awakening to other linguistic realities, to other worlds and to the glimpse of endless possibilities lurking in the languages that would open her eyes to the complexity of human experience.

After spending some time in Venice with her parents, Mary begins to be able to communicate in Italian thanks to her total immersion and exposure to the spoken language. Olga Rudge insists that her daughter should speak only Italian when she spends time with them in Venice and try to suppress German, her mother tongue. Mary was not willing to give up the German language, which she had spoken in a completely different context – a rural context, outdoors, in the presence of her host parents. It was part of her linguistic identity and she wanted to preserve it at all costs. As she notes,

> By now I was able to communicate somehow in Italian. Mamile said in Venice I must speak Italian all the time and call Tattile "Babbo." Her stern attitude handicapped me more than the language barrier had done. For fear of lapsing into German or saying the wrong thing, I turned poker face. If Tattile now and again resorted to German she knitted her brows: "Caro!" So I did not tell her then that twice a week, with the slate hidden under my apron, I went to our neighbors for German lessons. (p. 45)

Soon the English language, completely foreign to her, bursts into Mary's life, and she learns both English and Italian at the same time. On the evenings Mary spends with her mother, they settle down on the large velvet sofa they have in their Venice apartment, while Pound works on his poetry. The mother reads her stories in English, summarises them in Italian and, at the end, as a reward for her concentration, shows the drawings of the ogre, Puss in Boots and other characters to a little girl eager for stories. Although Mary enjoys the stories and her mother's company, she reveals that the learning experience was quite stressful:

> All of a sudden Mamile might ask me to repeat a word in English, or make me retell the story I had just heard in Italian. My mind stopped. Even if I had understood the story, grope as I might, no Italian word would come to me, and the more I liked the story the more I would assimilate it into my dialect and only German words would come to the tip of my tongue. (p. 51)

Mary confesses that her mother was not a patient teacher. What the poet's daughter was experiencing as a plurilingual subject *in potentia* at these moments was nothing but interference of the mother tongue, firmly entrenched in her mind, with the new languages that were working their way into her linguistic identity. Without knowing it, Rudge was engaging in an exercise of *translanguaging* (Garcia & Li, 2014) with Mary by reading her stories in English and asking her to summarise the content in Italian. Inevitably, no matter how motivated and interested in the stories the learner was, the German language would inevitably emerge from within her to name her reality. However, the fact that Mary resorted to another code, one of the multiple expressive resources of her complex linguistic repertoire to express her understanding of the story, was not approved by Rudge.

Mary's complex linguistic repertoire gradually expands thanks to the father figure. Pound attaches great importance to work, to sustained effort over time, to perseverance: "The Herr had said everyone must work, be self-sufficient, either by one's brain or one's hands" (p. 66), Mary writes. Perhaps one of the most revealing passages of *Discretions* is found in a few pages in which the poet gives his daughter what he calls "Laws for Maria" and an outline of the school curriculum she should follow at home – knowledge that Pound considers essential for her education. He does so in a telegraphic language, almost gnomic in texture, in which he enunciates with great brevity and clarity the principles by which his daughter should conduct herself, harmonising English, French, Latin, German and Italian in his writing: "NOT to be a nuisance" and "autarchie personale" (p. 69). Next, he outlines the essentials of the curriculum she is to learn:

> Curriculum: I. Typewriting (dattilografia).
> II. Lingua Italiana without which you will not be able to sell what you write in Italy.
> III. Translation.
> IV. Inventive writing? first simple articles, then the novel.
> That is to say, I can only teach you the profession I know. (p. 70)

Following his own roadmap for his daughter's education, Pound would take the reins of Mary's language learning, while training her as a writer, a scholar of her own work and a translator. He gave her a small bilingual English-Italian dictionary, which the girl received with great enthusiasm, although she made little use of it at first. Mary writes: "My English was still limited to two nursery rhymes. [...] My resistance to the English language – and to the things this language would disclose to me? – was still strong" (pp. 81-82). She had an arduous task ahead of her to learn one of the central languages that Pound used in writing *The Cantos*, which Mary would later translate into Italian.

Rudge continues to delve into the Italian language with Mary. She instructs her daughter to read a book in Italian about Giotto, the great Italian Renaissance painter, and to summarise each page in Italian during the time she spends in Gais. Upon her return to Venice, Rudge reviews her homework carefully. Mary, who lived at ease in a rural setting, confesses: "I liked the story well enough since Giotto had started out as a shepherd, but writing a summary was a bore" (pp. 94-95). Once again, her mother forces her daughter to read a text written in academic, cognitively demanding language, in a language foreign to Mary, and to make an effort at producing a written summary in that language. Rudge was thus providing her daughter with a learning experience typical of the CLIL approach, albeit with virtually no scaffolding or explicit support to help her assimilate the language and content. However, we ignore how Rudge checked the summary that Mary was to present to her upon her return to Venice. It is likely that the correction was accompanied by a dialogue around the texts, which would surely allow the student to language in Italian her understanding of the text she had read.

Pound immediately begins to teach German literature to Mary. "[H]e seemed very eager to educate me himself" (p. 98), writes Mary. At one point, the daughter is sent to a school where she receives her education entirely in Italian. The ban on the use of the German language is lifted, as the parents had ensured continued exposure to Italian in an academic context. Mary recalls how her father gives her her first book, Heinrich Heine's *Buch der Lieder*. Sitting on his lap, her father would have her read aloud Heine's poems, stoically enduring her stammering (p. 98). Then would come the reading of biblical episodes in English. Pound would read a few pages of the Bible to her before sending her to bed each night. Although she understood the story, she was unable to understand any of the English text (p. 99). Soon after, it would be the turn of classical languages, Greek and Latin, which could not be missing in a humanistic education. While Pound worked on *The Cantos* on his typewriter for a few hours in the morning, Mary studied these two new languages. Afternoons were spent outdoors, playing tennis to keep fit and exploring the local culture in outdoor history or art classes. *Mens sana in corpore sano*. Pound showed his daughter the city of Siena, inch by inch, stone by stone, just as he explored Venice in detail. Simone Martino's paintings, the frescoes, the floor of the Duomo, the various gates and fountains of the city were the object of their attention and study. However, excursions to local highlights were just the beginning of the learning process: "As usual he would make me describe in writing what we had seen" (p. 133). Like in CLIL teaching, Mary was studying

history and art through languages of instruction foreign to her, learning content and language in an integrated way. Yet the whole learning process was underpinned by an essential premise for Pound: language must be employed with accuracy and clarity in naming realities, the world and the things that populate it, for it is a tool of knowledge of the utmost precision. Mary had to learn to think and write with clarity, grace, and elegance. This is how she expresses it in *Discretions*: "I listened most attentively to the summons: learn how to write. I was a slow thinker. THINK – it baffled me. How does one go about "thinking" – thinking as different from describing, remembering, inventing. The question seemed too complicated" (p. 139).

Mary combined her Greek lessons with Pound with Latin and French classes given to her by a priest, Father Chute, the only person she saw between 1941 and 1943 besides her parents (p. 147). World War II had broken out and, during those two years of total seclusion, Rudge continued to teach her daughter English. With two or three hours of lessons every day in the morning, sometimes even a few more hours after lunch, Mary and her mother devoured together in those two years the novels of Jane Austen, William M. Thackeray, Robert Louis Stevenson, Thomas Hardy, about a dozen volumes of Henry James, and the diary of James's sister, Alice James. Father Chute and Rudge offered him an orderly and systematic reading and learning programme, whereas Pound offered him "action, work, in streams and in flashes" (p. 149). At one point, he gives her a copy of *Under the Greenwood Tree*, by her admired Hardy, to translate into Italian. Mary is both flattered by the assignment and overwhelmed by the challenge. The task of translation turned out to be more demanding and arduous than she had initially imagined, but, as time went by, she waited expectantly for her father's arrival at the house where they now lived in Saint Ambroggio, near Rapallo. She listened for the sound of his cane on the path's stones and then the knock on the door, "for he brought with him a dimension of – no, not stillness, but magnitude, momentum. He made me feel that work, learning, was worthwhile, exciting" (p. 149). Homer's *Odyssey* is one of the key texts underpinning the overall architecture of *The Cantos*. Mary recalls how her father would read to her and her mother the lines of his monumental epic poem that he had been working on earlier in the day. Then it was the daughter's turn. Mary learned classical Greek by reading Homer's verses directly, imitating her father's pronunciation first, translating them later on into English or Italian. By then Mary's linguistic repertoire was truly polyphonic: German, Italian, English, French, Latin and Greek became the languages of her mind and life. To expand her linguistic repertoire, her parents deployed methodological strategies that anticipate the communicative approach, CLIL teaching, and translanguaging.

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