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Interview

Bilingualism, Education and English: An interview with Hugo Baetens Beardsmore

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Abstract
In this interview, Professor Hugo Baetens Beardsmore first talks about his story of how he became bilingual when he was very young, pointing out that the term "mother tongue" can be sexist and provocative. He then talks about his Ph.D. research on language usage in the Belgian capital (Brussels), the publication of which in the early 1970s immediately provoked much interest in the press in Belgium and France; one major contribution of this earlier research included his socio-linguistic explanations of what made Brussels French distinct from French elsewhere (e.g. Paris in France). In his most influential book Bilingualism: Basic Principles (first edition by Multilingual Matters in 1982), he argues that bilingualism is not a problem but an enrichment and underscores the interdisciplinary nature of work on bilingualism, explaining why this book covered not only purely linguistic aspects but also many other (e.g. sociological and psychological) aspects. He shares his experiences of giving invited lectures in countries including Germany, Singapore, Spain, Switzerland and the US, where he needed to address the four types of worries concerning bilingualism, namely Politico-Ideological Fears, Educational Fears, Parental Fears and Cultural Fears. Finally, after sharing his interesting experience of producing a daily language tip in English on Belgian radio, he offers some study tips to EFL learners in China.

Keywords
bilingualism, bilingual education, multilingualism, mother tongue, English language teaching, benefits of bilingualism

Do you remember how you became bilingual?

I was born in the town hall of a small village in Belgium, where the mayor delivered me and immediately entered my name in the registry as the first birth of the year, stating that this augured well for my future. I was not brought up as a "simultaneous bilingual" with two languages from birth, as my only home language was a Flemish dialect of Dutch. My father died before I was 2 years old and my mother married an Englishman a few years later, so when we moved to England I began to learn English. I had started school in Dutch in Belgium and moved straight into an English school on arrival. Hence I became an "early consecutive bilingual" though I have no recollections of learning English. There was a time when I could

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not speak the language and a time when I could, though I remained strongly influenced by my family's Flemish dialect and my mother's unidentifiable accent in English, which everyone found charming.

Is your own family bilingual?

Partially, yes. I was often perturbed when people asked what my "mother tongue" was since the term is ambiguous, as it may imply "language first learnt, language best known, most comfortable language, language of self-identity, etc., etc." (Byram & Hu, 2013, p. 474-476). It may even have sexist overtones and in provocation I would sometimes answer, "my father tongues are Dutch and English," depending on my two fathers, and I personally prefer to say that my preferred language depends on who I am interacting with, when, and where. One of my brothers spoke Dutch, English, French and German, though most other closer family members are more or less monolingual, though Belgians in general are pretty open to other languages, even if they may not master them well. For example, my cousins, who did not have any English lessons, communicate in broken English with English cousins, in French when tourists stop to ask the way and even in German if necessary.

To what extent did "being bilingual" determine your choice of research area?

I took to language learning with gusto at school and university, studying French, German and Italian, and picking up a feeling for Welsh as an undergraduate. My chequered personal linguistic development culminated in a doctorate based on bilingual influences (published as *Le français régional de Bruxelles*, 1971), which analysed the impact of Flemish dialect on Brussels French and led to my subsequent career.

Because of language policy implications, the publication of my Ph.D. thesis provoked much interest in the press in Belgium and France, with several half-page articles outlining the major findings, interviews on news, radio broadcasts and articles by members of parliament. The media were particularly interested in the historical evolution of the two languages in Brussels, developments in census statistics which changed the city from a Dutch language majority to a French-speaking majority, together with socio-linguistic explanations of what made Brussels French distinct from French elsewhere.

The specific characteristics of my research on language usage in the Belgian capital required field-work with representatives from all walks of life and led to many interesting and at times amusing recorded interviews. I had materials from different social categories, including prisoners in jail, patients in geriatric wards, beer-drinkers in popular cafés who mistook me for a health worker, a snooping private detective, a reporter, or a social security inspector, since some respondents could not imagine a person over 22 still "in school", as they put it. This type of field-work was backed up by intensive library research since the features that turned up had to be compared to standard Dutch as used in The Netherlands and standard French as used in Paris so as to discover how the deviations could be explained.

Many years later I was involved in directing a more complex investigation on language usage in Brussels, as the capital of Europe, to discover trends in the use of French or Dutch as the national languages among native Belgians and international migrants, including blue- and white-collar employees, civil servants and diplomats at the European Commission, the NATO Headquarters and the plethora of embassies. As this type of investigation was politically extremely sensitive, we had to be excessively careful to avoid any criticism on the methodology chosen, the training of interviewers, the representativity of the sample (3000 subjects) and the presentation of results. Findings revealed the rate of changes in language usage across generations, the increase in bilingual skills, the use of either French or Dutch in official circumstances, the tendency to switch languages or not, and which languages those of foreign origin used according to their skills in French or Dutch. Results also led to the concept of a "default" language in a bilingual city, i.e. the language people fall back on in non-threatening circumstances, which may not be the case when linguistic identity or linguistic legislation is important.

Analysing my mother's use of English, the nature of my personal linguistic development, the questions raised as a result of my immigrant status in Britain, the problems of identification because of a "bilingual" surname, the research on Brussels and its bilingual status, inspired me to offer a course on bilingualism to 4th year students of languages or education at the Flemish University of Brussels. The Faculty allowed me to introduce the course on the condition that it went under the title "Advanced course on the study of bilingual problems". This condition perturbed me, since I always felt that monolingualism was the problem, but I accepted, leading to the first course on bilingualism for *undergraduates* in Europe (1980), if not in the world. When interested students enquired as to which language I would use in the course I would sometimes reply, "Bilingual, of course!", given that participants came from different faculties and were sometimes of mixed or foreign origin. I also allowed them to choose the language of their oral examination if it was one I could handle. I have taught through the medium of English (English Linguistics), French (Sociology of Language) and Dutch (Explanation of Historical Texts) in different courses on the same day, and still regularly use all three at different times of the day. Students in Communication Sciences asked me to expand my course on "Terminology of the Anglo-Saxon Media" into a trilingual performance, claiming that they did not know the equivalent terminology in Dutch or French and the three languages would be useful in their future careers. I was not happy with this request, but students consistently voted it as a model example, primarily I believe because they had a boost of self-confidence in their receptive language skills.

What led you to write your book Bilingualism: Basic Principles?

My personal history, doctoral research, subsequent career as a specialist in French who taught English at university level, inspired the book *Bilingualism: Basic Principles* (1982, 1986), which, as the first publication by Multilingual Matters, sold well internationally, serving as a foundation source for a discipline that has considerably developed over time. My major goal was to show that bilingualism is NOT intrinsically a problem but an enrichment, that bilinguals statistically outnumber monolinguals on a world level and that misconceptions and research bias required a more scientific approach to its development. I also wanted to underline the interdisciplinary nature of work on bilingualism by covering not only purely linguistic aspects, but also sociological and psychological questions, educational, testing and policy issues and even the literary exploitation of bilingual situations. All these approaches have figured in my later work, the only regret being that I did not master statistics, given that today quantitative approaches tend to dominate, though I still maintain that these should be supported by qualitative approaches, given that we are dealing with human beings in varied situations with complex configurations.

What positions did you want to defend in your book (and in later writings)?

Initially the book aimed to clarify specifically what bilingualism is, under what different forms it existed and how speakers who knew more than one language used them, how they were perceived and what the consequences of being bilingual might be. For example, in one experiment I produced recordings of a monolingual native-speaker and a bilingual speaker's use of English for judgement by language students in Belgium, Britain and Germany. All respondents were asked for their personal definition of bilingualism, which most gave as, "the perfect knowledge of two languages," claiming themselves as non-bilingual. The majority of responses rejected the bilingual's English as not reflecting bilingual competence, even though most judged it acceptable and comprehensible. Since I have never come across a "perfect bilingual," or a "perfect monolingual," for that matter, the implicit value judgement for users of two languages reveals unconscious bias and impossible criteria.

In 1976 I was requested by the European Commission to investigate the educational problems confronted by parents whose careers led them frequently to change countries where schooling was not available in the initial home language of their children. The aim was to encourage employment mobility and internationalisation within Europe, so as to promote economic development. After visiting several pioneering schools in different countries confronted with the issue of educating children through two or three languages (cf. *European Models of Bilingual Education*, 1993), observations revealed that whether two or three languages were involved the linguistic issues were similar, though the contextual and pedagogic issues were more diverse, and more intricate. Some schools encouraged exclusively using one or the other language in different parts of the programme, whereas others either allowed some sort of switching, or even encouraged it as a help towards content learning.

Both my doctoral thesis and this first work with policy makers taught me a lot about the politics of language issues, the more so as I come from a country notorious for its language conflicts (cf. Witte, E. & Baetens Beardsmore, H., 1987 *The Interdisciplinary Study of Urban Bilingualism in Brussels*). Consequently I worked as a consultant to different governments and was requested to address parliaments on language planning and educational issues in a variety of contexts in Europe, Asia, Africa and the Americas.

Who is (still) afraid of bilingualism nowadays?

One of my most frequently requested lectures goes under the title of *Who's Afraid of Bilingualism* (2003), which I have delivered in Spain, Switzerland, California, Singapore, Germany, and Belgium. Such frequent requests reveal that in spite of progress in the understanding of some of the issues involved there is still a long way to go. The types of worries that come to light break down into the four categories of Politico-Ideological Fears, Educational Fears, Parental Fears and Cultural Fears.

Certain authorities base their reticence towards bilingual development on nationalistic ideologies which may foster or impede separatism, others on misgivings about the effects of bilingualism due to entrenched monolingual (superiority) complexes, others on familiarity with problem cases of language in education due to inadequate provision, catastrophic implementation strategies and social deprivation.

One factor is that most people feel they are experts in language and education because they all speak at least one language and have all been to school, hence basing their opinions for or against bilingual education on haphazard, personal or anecdotal evidence using simplified interpretations of complex issues. I have often been confronted by articulate opponents of bilingual education who have learnt to manipulate a second language through traditional language lessons and who tend to take their personal success as an example. They might thereby be ignoring their intellectual, social or educational privileges, treating as "losers" those who are confronted with difficulties in validating their experience with more than one language. This is particularly the case in a school system that might not promote successful exploitation of bilingualism, thereby hampering the climb up the social ladder.

Parental fears often come to the fore when a bilingual programme is offered for the first time. I regularly give evening talks all over the country to parent associations requiring re-assurance about a bilingual initiative they are not familiar with. The sessions sometimes go on till midnight and I distinguish between regular general questions and more specific, private queries which I handle discretely afterwards. Parents often worry about which language to start teaching reading in, how they can contribute to homework when they don't know the target language, whether too much of the timetable being devoted to L2 will retard knowledge of the home language, how to organise non-scholastic outside activities in which language, etc., etc. Answers to the above type of question must be carefully considered since the particular environment, the specific combination of languages, the nature of the curriculum, all have an influence and imply that there is no "one size fits all" answer.

For example: both English and French have very complex writing systems that do not easily reflect pronunciation, unlike Dutch, Italian or Spanish. In the particular context of French-speaking Belgian, bilingual schools can decide to start teaching young children how to read either in their first language, or in their second language, or in both at the same time, depending on teacher availability. Some French-speaking parents who enrol their young children in a bilingual programme where Dutch is the target language tend to worry when told that reading will first be taught in the easier Dutch only, leaving reading in French aside. After the first year these children are taught to read in French and to the parents' horror they hear their French-speaking children reading their first French texts aloud with a strong Dutch accent! This is a temporary development and after two weeks the teachers train the children to relate the French written script to their knowledge of French and the Dutch writing to their other reading language. Test results taken a few years later, at the end of primary school, reveal that the children involved in programmes that taught reading in the L2 first have native-speaker reading skills in their French home language, and advanced reading skills in Dutch. These positive results are better than in schools that select the alternative programmes.

In your definition of bilingualism, you mention two (or more) languages (or dialects). Does that mean that you consider bilingualism and multilingualism to be the same? Aren't there both quantitative and qualitative differences?

In the specialist literature some authors refer to bilingualism as an umbrella term including the notions of bi-dialectism and multilingualism whereas others refer to multilingualism as including the sub-divisions of bilingualism and bi-dialectism. Distinctions between the different combinations are legitimate, depending on the aims of an analysis, since the whole area of investigation is marked by complexity, to use a currently fashionable term in research on language questions. One of the pioneers in the field, William Mackey (1976), claimed that over 3000 variables could possibly intervene in a class implementing a bilingual education programme, making any analysis partial. Applied mathematicians are confronted with a similar problem when investigating phenomena such as "mass in a flow" (e.g., how particles in a liquid may affect viscosity, whether in water supplies or a weapon's firing efficiency). The issue of how precisely to define the phenomena of using more than one language depends on the major thrust of any investigation, given that there are certain points of similarity or difference between bilingualism and multilingualism, depending on the objectives of the study.

To take some examples from the educational sector. I have been involved in the promotion of Content and Language Integrated Learning, or CLIL, as a European term which covers various types of bi- or multilingual education programmes (cf. Marsh et al., 2002). In its promotion of greater mobility coupled with European integration the European Commission has proposed encouraging all citizens to acquire what they designate as "Mother tongue plus 2 other languages" or M+2. The choice of CLIL to represent this format is a political decision resulting from an analysis of practice in the 27 member states; in some countries the words "bilingual education" are taboo; in others the Canadian designation of "immersion" is not accepted; in some the bilingual programme may cover teaching non-language subjects through the medium of two languages, while in others three languages may be involved, depending on the population make-up, language legislation or the level of instruction, which may differ considerably in primary, secondary or tertiary education. Luxembourg has no specific term to designate its official language programme which uses three languages at all levels of education for the entire population, merely referring to "education" in the way monolingual schools do elsewhere. The two universities of Brussels, one based on French, the other on Dutch as primary language of instruction, both oblige students following programmes in Business and Management Studies to follow some courses in which three different languages are distributed across distinct content-matter subjects, the two Belgian national languages and English.

Hence three sets of factors come into play in discussions on how to categorise programmes promoting more than one language; situational factors, which determine the context for language choices, operational factors, which determine the possible strategies required to use two or more languages in a curriculum, and outcome factors, which fix the targets and measurement tools used in a given programme's finality (Baetens Beardsmore, 2009).

My consultancy work with different ministries of education reveals how official authorities may or may not take two or three distinct languages into account in their education programmes. For example, the government of Brunei uses Malay, English and Arabic in its official school programmes; Malay as the cement of national cohesion, English for science and economic development and Arabic for religious reasons. However, some children do not have Malay as their home language but a distinct Borneo language, implying that they are confronted with four languages in their childhood. Bruneian children are also taught the use of Arabic script (*Jawi*) for Arabic and Malay and the Latin alphabet for both English and Malay, thereby adding a further parameter in the design of the school programmes. Privately run Chinese schools in Brunei use Chinese, English and Malay.

The special French regional government of La Réunion off the coast of Africa imposes a monolingual all-French programme of education, ignoring the fact that the majority of children have the distinct French Creole as their home language. Creole is minimally tolerated in a few pioneering programmes, serving as a stepping-stone towards a monolingual education system that ignores the linguistic reality of the island.

Kazakhstan is gradually building up a unique, predominantly bilingual programme for a population that is primarily made up of Kazakh or Russian home-language speakers. (The other regional languages present in some areas of the country will not be addressed here.) A simplified outline reveals that those with Kazakh as their home language receive content-matter lessons in Kazakh and English, and Russian in language lessons, those with Russian as a home language receive content-matter in Russian and English and Kazakh in language lessons. Two scripts complicate the process, since Kazakh and Russian use the Cyrillic script, though there are plans to use the Latin alphabet for Kazakh, alongside English (Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools, 2012).

A final example comes from the European School system, in use since 1958 for the children of European civil servants coming from different member states where all are expected to follow lessons in their major home language, a certain amount of content-matter through a second language and the compulsory choice of a third language from a range on offer. As the schools are divided into up to eight different linguistic-national sub-sections, all following the same curriculum and taking the same exams, irrespective of the base language of a particular group, this is a unique example of a multilingual programme following a predominantly bilingual curriculum, but where there is a great mixture of languages on each site. Anecdotally, parents are often amazed to hear their children speaking in a fourth or fifth language not part of their curriculum, but picked up from playground and friendship circles (cf. Flores, N. & Baetens Beardsmore, H. 2015).

An interesting thing is that bilinguals will stay within one language when talking to monolinguals. However, when talking to other bilinguals, they will probably switch from one language to another. There are quite some misunderstandings regarding the phenomena of code-switching, code-mixing, and so-called "translanguaging." Some people believe that code-mixing or code-switching is a sign of linguistic deficit, a sign of laziness, or a sign of attempting to show off on the part of a bilingual. What would you comment on this kind of belief?

I was involved in an intensive three-year programme of research into code-switching involving about 250 scholars which led to 5 publications sponsored by the European Science Foundation, aiming to unravel the nature, prevalence and characteristics of different types of mixed language usage, according to context and competence (cf. Milroy & Muysken, 1995). In no cases did code-switching (or translanguaging) reflect serious deficits, though they did show the effects of mixed code-usage on perceptions and attitudes. In only a few cases did the use of a combination of different language features reveal major inadequacies or handicaps, as when speakers were stigmatised, criticised or penalised for not sticking to a majority language in a specific environment.

Some bilingual speakers use elements from both languages in certain circumstances, usually when they know this will not impede communication with other similar bilinguals, whereas other bilinguals sharing the same combination may not do so, depending on the topic of discussion, the environment, the presence or absence of overhearers. Speakers who have not had sufficient opportunity to acquire a second language may inadvertently or deliberately have recourse to a "borrowed" first-language item or structure in a monolingual environment, at times leading to stigmatisation, but this is hardly different from inappropriate social etiquette conventions manifested by monolinguals in a non-familiar cultural setting. The current debate on translanguaging evolves round the emphasis given either to the *sociolinguistic* aspect of classroom language use or the norm-related *linguistic* issue of exit test measures for certification.

There is a growing concern among parents that bilingualism will delay language acquisition in children because they have to deal with two or more languages. Is there a valid reason to be worried?

The models examined and the in-depth research into code-switching revealed that properly designed bilingual upbringing, at home and at school, in no way impedes intellectual or behavioural development in children, on the contrary. Consequently parents confronted with the possibility of bringing a child up in two distinct languages from a very early age should normally not fear any deficiencies. (Cases of dyslexia or speech impairment are a separate issue and need adjustments, as in monolingual circumstances.) If the parents are not bilingual themselves they may note that their child can at times show different language usage patterns from those of a monolingual child, but such developmental differences normally represent nothing more than the bilingual having more choices, more options in language usage than a monolingual and hence needs to work out intuitively how to select the appropriate language and social interaction codes. Nevertheless, hastily imposed bilingual strategies, at home, at school and in society, coupled with prejudice and social deprivation, can lead to unfortunate failure and stress. Those involved in bilingual upbringing should be well-informed, well-trained, and well-supported, the more so if they are confronted with misapprehensions about multilingual skills. Two regional authorities in the United Kingdom (Wales and Scotland) provide information kits in pre-natal clinics on how to bring children up bilingually, considered just as important as other aspects of child-rearing for parents to-be.

Are bilinguals also bicultural? Can someone be bilingual without being bicultural?

Questions of language and culture can be at the origin of political discussions and *multilingual* countries with or without *plurilingual* citizens (to use the distinction used by the Council of Europe) have to produce language policies and language management strategies. Since a culture does not exist without a language, this raises questions on the relationship between bilingualism and biculturalism. It is possible for some individuals to be bilingual and bicultural, others are bilingual and monocultural, just as some people can be bicultural and monolingual. Several simple psychosocial tests can reveal these possibilities,

for example, the word-association test, where subjects are asked to write down the first three words that come to mind on hearing a stimulus word. When Canadian monolinguals of either English or French heard the stimulus word, "doctor(Eng.)/ docteur (Fr.)" the majority of English-speakers responded with "nurse/patient" whereas the majority of French-speakers gave "sickness/health". These divergent responses might well reflect cultural differences. Bilinguals who were also bicultural gave similar responses to the English or French monolinguals respectively for the test taken in each language separately, whereas the bilinguals who were monocultural tended to give the same response in both languages. Other, more sophisticated tests, for example, the sentence-completion task, e.g. "When I quarrel with my wife…….", tend to evoke responses like, "the only solution is divorce" in young bilingual men in Arabic, with responses like, "I try to discuss the problem" by the more bicultural young men using their French. The monocultural people tend to give the same answer in both languages. (cf. Bentahila,1983).

Some studies have shown that if one knows two or more languages one may experience a delay in the onset of dementia (e.g. Alzheimer's disease) Can you share with us some major cognitive benefits of bilingualism/multilingualism?

In preparation for the European Year of Creativity (2009), I joined a team of researchers who were requested to provide an analysis of the relationship between multilingualism and creativity. This led us to analyse about 1,500 studies revealing some perceptions on the issue and enabling us to arrive at *tentative* conclusions in favour of a positive relationship, but which require further more rigorously specific investigation.

The main positive features found include the following:

a. Bilingual children are better in tasks which require not the finding of the *single* correct answer to a question, but where they are asked to imagine a number of *possible* correct answers.
b. Bilingual children are better in tasks of divergent thinking. Some research into multilingualism and cognitive flexibility used tests where the subjects were asked to look at a picture which has more than one image embedded into it, and describe what they see. Bilingual children were more successful than monolinguals in seeing the other meaning in the images.
c. Studies on cognitive skills. Research in Italy and Switzerland has consistently shown intriguing differences in cognitive abilities; tests using L1 gave slightly better results on *factual* information, or "knowing what", whereas tests using L2 showed better results on *operational* information, or "knowing how" (Gajo & Serra, 2002).
d. As for metalinguistic skills, there appears to be a greater understanding of how language is used to achieve specific goals in life involving understanding that words can have more than one meaning, identifying ambiguity, translating words and interpreting concepts, in other terms, using languages to learn, and learning to use languages, enabling the person to go beyond the words.
e. Studies on interpersonal relations reveal better understanding and responding to the communicative needs of others, contextual sensitivity and highly developed interactional competence in communication. Multilingualism is reported as helping to nurture interpersonal communication awareness and skills.
f. A tentative finding was that older bi- or multilinguals tended to manifest a two-year delay in the onset of dementia when compared with monolinguals. This requires further investigation.

You were one of the first foreign scholars to be invited to lecture in China (Guangzhou) at the opening up of the country to foreigners in 1980. Can you share with us some

interesting phenomena/incidents (relating to English language teaching and/or bilingualism) during your fist visit to China? What shocked you most when you visited China for the first time? What shocked you when you visited China for a second time?

My work for the European Commission gradually led to invitations to help develop language policy strategies, particularly in education, in different parts of the world, including the World Bank in Washington, the California State Department of Education, the Canadian Government, the Basque and Catalan Regional Governments in Spain, the Governments of Singapore and Brunei, and led thus to insights into multilingual issues in highly divergent contexts.

One of my most interesting missions came from the Hong Kong colonial authorities in 1986 to help prepare the language education issues for the return of the Colony to China in 1997. I suggested a trilingual programme teaching through the medium of Cantonese, Putonghua and English by taking inspiration from the Luxembourg model in place since 1913, and where the whole school population is educated through three languages, leading the Prime Minister of Luxembourg to state that "Multilingualism is our mother tongue", given that Luxemburgish, a small and partially standardised, language, is the *only* symbol to distinguish its citizens from its neighbours according to a local newspaper, *L'Avenir du Luxembourg*, 1989. Statistics regularly collected on the European level reveal interesting and contradictory findings on the relationship between language and the economy. Luxembourg has one of the highest standards of living per capita in the world and teachers are extremely well paid! 98% of the population claims to be competent in the use of three or more languages, the highest score in Europe (*Special Eurobarometer*, 2012). Luxembourg does less well in comparative measures of skills in science, mathematics and literacy for 15-year-olds than many other countries, though this could perhaps be partially attributed to a handicap through the very high number of immigrant children from different language backgrounds in the school system and the fact that the tests imposed may have to be taken in the second, third or fourth language of the pupils involved, where this is rarely the case elsewhere. However, the same statistics for autonomous regions in Italy (the Val d'Aoste with a bilingual education programme in Italian and French for all children), in Spain (the Basque Country using Basque and Spanish for all; the Catalan region using Catalan and Spanish for all) revealed better results on the three measures tested than those for the national states in which they were embedded. A comparison made in 2009 on the PISA (OECD international student assessment) tests for 15-year-olds on reading, mathematics, and science showed how the bilingual/trilingual systems often scored better than the monolingual schools in the countries these autonomous regions belonged to.

	Reading	Maths	Science
OECD mean	493	496	501
Basque Country	494	488	482
Catalonia	498	496	497
Spain	481	483	488
Val d'Aoste	514	502	521
Italy	486	483	489
Luxembourg	472	489	484

My attempts to allay reticence about the use of Cantonese, Putonghua and English in Hong Kong were not successful, yet the social and educational issues involved still exist.

Another exiting mission was in 1980, when I was the first foreign scholar to lecture in Guangzhou. I spent the mornings lecturing to hundreds of students in French and the afternoons in English and was amazed at the enthusiasm of the staff and students, who had not seen a foreigner for years. Equipment

was very basic, books were scarce and the library pitifully empty, with the few dictionaries available chained up so as not to disappear. The thirst for knowledge and skills was inspiring, some of the students putting many questions on the nature of programmes abroad and I was struck by the fact that the students I spoke to were sometimes more fluent and had better accents than their teachers. On my return to Guangzhou 20 years later I was impressed by the progress and prosperity everywhere apparent. Language skills were just as high and as prevalent as during my first visit, but equipment and materials were as up-to-date as anywhere and there was a greater atmosphere of well-being. I was hence a witness to a success story in the making!

At the request of Belgian Radio you broadcast a daily language spot for two years on how to improve English skills. Can you share with Chinese EFL learners some interesting bits of your broadcasting experience?

During my missions to different language planning authorities, e.g., in Kazakhstan or the Republic of Ireland, I frequently suggested using the media to inform the public on language learning skills. We in Belgium had considerable experience in encouraging people to improve their language usage, via the printed press, television and radio. Newspapers regularly printed tips on how to avoid dialect features in standard language, and there was a professor on television who became so popular with his friendly advice on Dutch that he ended up being elected to the senate.

I was invited to produce a daily language tip in English on Belgian radio and the broadcasting authorities knew exactly how to target their listeners. My two- minute tip was introduced by a lively signature tune and inserted just after 6:30 p.m. between the news bulletin and the weather forecast, with the knowledge that audiences tended not to switch off or change channels until they had heard the weather bulletin. The same tip was broadcast daily for two years on the classical music channel towards 10:58 p.m. since audience research had shown that that was when many teachers tuned in to the news before going to sleep.

With this knowledge I tended to keep my tips friendly and easy to digest, specifically covering language features not handled in standard courses, but which I thought were useful for easy communication. For example, I indicated some of the differences between British, American, Australian, Irish English. I often gave pronunciation hints, so as to avoid "spelling pronunciations". For example, I pointed out that "p" in words like "psychology, psychiatry" is not pronounced, that the "r" in "iron" is not pronounced, that the second "b" in "bomb, bombing" is not pronounced, as many learners make mistakes of this type. The topics also covered socio-cultural features of language usage, such as avoiding the use of clichés like, "And last, but not least…", frequently over-used by foreigners and which native-speakers often find irritating. I pointed out differences in the way men and women tend to use the language, particularly since many teachers of English were women and their language preferences made their men students occasionally sound strange. For example, women use adjectives like "exquisite, adorable, divine, sweet, pretty" more often than men, whereas men tend to use terms like "great, fantastic, very good" in similar contexts. Some of my broadcasts handled mistakes regularly made by Dutch or French-speakers of English, particularly "false friends" like the word "library" being mistakenly used to mean "bookshop". A similar programme for Chinese users of English could help ensuring that they mark final consonant sounds accurately, e.g. final "s" to distinguish singular from plural nouns, or the third person present of the verb, e.g. "she likes". This is one of the most frequently heard mistakes of Chinese users of English and is also the source of caricatures of Chinese users of the language in humorous sketches.

Gradually, listeners would write in to request a piece of advice on a particular feature of English and over time some wrote to the broadcasting station to request a printed version. This led to a modest publication, *Hints on English Usage (1975)*, which sold well for several years. Given that this was an

informal collection of observations and comments based on an oral delivery the book was not intended as a serious academic text.

I subsequently took part in a combined radio and television series aimed to promote the learning of English, particularly for people who had little contact with the language in school. This was accompanied by a course-book and a series of audio cassettes with written and spoken exercises. As with my radio talks, the aim was to be amusing and useful, to capture a less intellectual audience by creating characters in every-day circumstances.

The unexpected success of these programmes leads me to encourage students learning English to take advantage of the massive technical revolution afforded by the internet, something that did not exist when I did most of my teaching. No matter how good a textbook may be, how proficient teachers are, how well equipped in technical support a school or institution may be, there is nothing like personal interaction, personal initiative to expand one's language skills, particularly the cultural and intonation features. I always recommend learners to take every opportunity to practise their languages as this is the best way to progress, even if it requires some tenacity, especially if your listener switches to your stronger language on the mistaken assumption of helping out.

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On Belgian radio he broadcast a daily language spot for 2 years on English and has given press and television interviews aimed at raising awareness on language issues in many countries.

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