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## INTERVIEW

### In Conversation with Jean Marc Dewaele

*Jean Marc Dewaele (JMD) is an Emeritus Professor in Applied Linguistics & Multilingualism, Birkbeck, University of London. His research is situated in Social Sciences and Applied Linguistics. It focuses broadly on the effects of individual differences—often interacting with contextual variables—on multilingual language use and acquisition, with a focus on personality and emotion. It further focuses on emotions in the classroom, more specifically the various factors that contribute to successful foreign language learning and foreign language teaching. He is widely published and has given several invited lectures on related topics. This interview addresses questions regarding teaching a foreign language, especially English as a foreign language and the significance and problems of multilingual classrooms and the myth of native speaker.*

**Manjri Suman (MS):** On record, thank you again for allowing me to take an interview. Before we start I would like to give a brief introduction about myself as it will help you understand the context of the questions I ask. I am an MPhil and PhD in Linguistics. I have been teaching various courses of Linguistics to people who have English as their major and related courses of English Proficiency and Professional Communication to undergraduate and postgraduate students, as an assistant professor. When I started my teaching career, I used only English in the classroom because that is what my teachers did when I was a student. As soon as I entered my formal school, I was forbidden to speak in Hindi. I would have to speak in English all the time on the school premises. So, I grew up as a coordinate bilingual who spoke Hindi at home and English in a professional setting. Consequently, I taught my entire lecture in English, and sometimes I would wonder why some of the students acted confused. On asking they told me that “Madam, for the first ten minutes, we can grasp whatever you say. But after that, there is too much English,

and our brain gets overwhelmed with whatever you say". So, I started holding a separate class for them and made it bilingual. I noticed that it worked better for those students. Hence, the way I was taught and trained versus what I was practicing in real life were not going in sync with each other. With this brief background I would like to ask you a few questions. This is a newfound interest I have so please excuse me if the questions sound very basic.

Even the students who have been speaking English from a very early stage are taught by Indian teachers and, hence, the Indian variety of English. Many do not even realise that there can be something wrong in the way they speak. In fact, I have come across many language teachers who struggle with English proficiency themselves. So my first question to you is: how important do you think is the language proficiency of teachers in whatever target language they teach? Should they be impeccable, brilliant, and flawless? Or is it acceptable to make mistakes?

**JMD:** I think there is no teacher who is impeccable or flawless. We all have our faults and that is pretty normal. That being said, I do think that teachers need to be advanced users of the language they are teaching. So to use the common European framework as a point of reference, I think, in fact, I did study this with a PhD student of mine and we found that EFL teachers who were at C1 or C2 level were advanced users of English and they reported to be more creative in the classroom. They also reported significantly more positive attitudes towards their students. They scored higher in classroom practice compared to intermediate users who scored at B1 or B2 levels. So it does seem to have an effect on the way you teach. The more advanced you are in the target language, the more relaxed you can be in the classroom and probably the better teacher you will be. That does not imply that those who have an intermediate level are not good teachers. It is just a probability that the best teachers will also have the highest level of proficiency. Now, do they have a 100% level of proficiency? I think that's going too far. As you said earlier, I think it is absolutely fine for teachers to speak their variety of the target language. So if you teach English in India, it seems absolutely normal to use the Indian English variety. Just as in French, I would use the Belgian French variety. But it is my first language, or one of my two first languages. So I think we should not exaggerate the importance of being so-called perfect in the target language, because I think it is a source of anxiety and frustration, both for teachers and for students. I think that for

language classrooms, it is crucial that students as well as teachers feel happy with the way they can communicate and with the variety they use to communicate, and that is absolutely fine.

**MS:** Thank you. You answered a crucial question with such ease. This would be helpful to both language teachers and learners who mock at the slightest mistake of their teacher. In continuation to that answer, I would like to add another question. English has syllabic stress. There are stress markers on the pronunciation of English words. Like the difference between noun and verb forms of 'Present/Pre'sent or 'Content/Con'tent or the change in stress of syllables due to change in syllabic structure like 'Economy' vs 'Economics'. But in Hindi or most Indian languages, words have equal stress on all syllables.

**JMD:** I say that too. I say the same thing, and I am not worried about it.

**MS:** So, Hindi speakers pronounce English words just like Hindi. For most Indian speakers all the syllables are equally stressed. A very small chunk of the Indian users of English is taught or knows the difference. But the majority does not distinguish between these forms. How important are these pronunciation distinctions?

**JMD:** I think it can have an effect on intelligibility and comprehensibility. If I ask something here in London and I put stress on the wrong part of the word, people will look at me and not understand what I am saying. Then, I understand that I put stress on the wrong part of the word, and I try again. The thing is, I am not getting stressed about this, but I do realise that it is useful to be taught at school for its accuracy. But I would say it is not absolutely vital, in the sense that you will survive linguistically if you occasionally put the stress in the wrong place of the word. But I think that teachers could do a good job if they say, well, you know, in British English, you put the stress there; in American English, you put the stress in a different place. And you may use some authentic materials, some video recordings, a brief extract of a film in one or the other version, and ask them to focus on this; *"Did you notice this?" "Did you notice, you know for instance, this person was getting angry?" "How was this person showing anger in the volume, or in the intonation, or in the stress, or in the silence?"* That is interesting stuff that the students will typically do themselves. And if they end up teaching like you in the United States, they will listen to their colleagues and friends, notice different patterns, and notice that these are meaningful. So, it is good to be aware that

sometimes they carry meaning. But that does not necessarily mean that you are expected to follow it 100%. If you struggle with it a little bit, it will take you a little time. But at some point, you will get there, or close enough, and then that is fine.

**MS:** Because teachers like me who are English language teachers and also linguists, are always in two minds. As linguists, we know we should accept it; we should not be prescriptivist and rather be descriptivist. But as a language teacher, I am bound to make them aware of the “Standard Accepted Form”. Hence, I am in a constant dilemma.

**JMD:** Yes, but the thing is that you can make it humorous. I mean you can lighten the mood by not making it too dramatic.

**MS:** Right! I think you already answered my next question indirectly but I would still like a direct answer. We know that there are many varieties of English spoken across the world. Should language trainers stick to the standard accepted variety, like American English or British English? Or is it more sensible to teach the nativised version of English? For example, Indian English speakers use terms like *preponed*, *betterment*, or phrases like *I am having a class today*, etc.

**JMD:** Yes. No, I think it is good to make learners aware that there are different varieties of the target language. And again, I think it can help to show them extracts from interviews or films so that they can see a person using that variety. They can also observe the non-verbal behaviour; they can listen to the intonation, volume, speech and also notice facial expressions, and movements of hands or arms. I think that showing them that there is so much variety will help them accept the fact that their’s is one of the many varieties of the target language and it does not need to fully match the varieties that are being taught. And you know, Americans who come to the UK, they sometimes also get corrected by British people saying, *No, no, that’s not how you say it here*. And vice versa.

**MS:** In continuation to this, do you feel native speakers turn out to be better teachers of their language? For example, I, as an Indian, might not be as good as a native English speaker would be.

**JMD:** No. First, I need to tell you off for using the terms ‘native speaker’ and ‘non-native speaker’. I think those are horrific concepts and terms that we should avoid. So, if you talk about a non-native speaker, then I am also a non-native speaker of English. I learned English when I was

14. I hated being categorised for something I am not. Why would I try to sound like a native speaker? I am not a native speaker of English and the whole concept of being determined, of being defined by something that you are not, is really wrong. So, I propose to talk about *first-language users*. There are people who use the first language because they were born with that language and then there are *foreign language users* who acquired that language later in life. They may be highly or minimally proficient in it. In fact, they may also use the first language but have lost proficiency because they have used that language for a long time. So, it is better to define people by the languages they use, but not in terms of how well they use them. The mythical native speaker has mud on its face, meaning that we should not compare foreign language learners to people who are first language users of that language. It makes no sense. It is like comparing apples and pears. It is impossible to measure anyway, and it does not matter. So the thing is, are you a better language teacher if you are teaching your first language? Well, in fact, I taught French, which is my first language. I also taught Spanish, which is my fourth language. And I think I was an equally good teacher in both classes in the way that being a good teacher does not necessarily mean having 100% proficiency or knowledge. It is the ability to connect with the students and to teach them knowledge and skills that they find useful. I realised that it was more tiring for me to teach Spanish to the first class. I told them that Spanish was my fourth language. This is why I was probably making the occasional mistake related to the gender of a word or some difficult verb forms, etc. But I said, "Look, I have grammar and a dictionary with me". At some point during class, I might say, "Oh, I have no idea what this word is again in Spanish". Then I would give the dictionary to a student and say: "Could you look that up for me?" That was it. I think that the students saw that it was honest of me. I was not pretending to have knowledge that I did not have. I obviously knew more than enough to teach them, but I was not a Spaniard. Of course, when I was teaching French, I had much more confidence in my knowledge and I would say that even in Spanish, I think the students empathise with the fact that I said, "*Oh, you know, I really struggled to get this because I have been through that learning process that you are in, and it is hard, isn't it?*" And then having that linguistic background also helped me explain why there are differences between French and Spanish in using the past tense and how it is different from the present progressive in English. If

you have that linguistic knowledge, you can explain relatively technical things clearly, which is something that students appreciate. And of course, if you are teaching your first language but have no knowledge of linguistics, there are questions that you cannot answer.

**MS:** I feel that the knowledge of linguistics gives me an advantage over others to teach the basic concepts and logic behind a certain grammatical or phonological feature. Even while teaching Hindi in the US, I realised that every language teacher must have a basic knowledge of linguistics. Should we propose that language teaching courses must have a paper or two in basic linguistics and language teaching skills or ELT?

**JMD:** Yes, definitely. It would also be good to have a course on multilingualism because India is such a multilingual country, and it is crucial to acknowledge that your students may be highly multilingual and that English might in fact be their fourth or fifth language. It is crucial to take that into account and it is also crucial to be aware of Francois Grosjean's theory of complementarity, which means that multilingual people are not necessarily equally proficient in all domains. So I would say that despite the fact that English is my third language, it is in fact the dominant language for my academic interactions, both oral and written. I can speak much more easily about my research in English than I can do in French and Dutch, which are my first languages. But obviously, if I talk to my wife about what shopping we are going to do and, you know, things to do with relationships and family, then we would obviously not do that in English. So, the thing is that you may have specific language preferences depending on the topic you are discussing and it is crucial to have that understanding if you are a language teacher. Therefore, I would strongly recommend a course on multilingualism and the multilingual brain and the fact that all these languages and cultural values also influence each other a little bit. You can see that most clearly when people code switch and, as you said before, I think it is perfectly fine for a teacher to code-switch in the class. If you are teaching English, you can switch to Hindi to explain something and then back to English. I think that it is helpful to be using the target language as much as possible because if students have relatively limited exposure to the language and the teacher is their main source of input, then that teacher should provide them with as much input as possible. But there is absolutely no prohibition on switching to other languages that the students know.

**MS:** What is your take on bilingual and multilingual classrooms? Should teachers restrict themselves to just one language or better understanding can be achieved by using two or three languages in the classroom?

**JMD:** I mean, there is extensive research these days on *trans-linguaging* and it suggests that teachers should not be afraid of letting other languages into the classroom. It does not mean that these other languages should take over from the target language, but there is space for these other languages in the classroom. And by showing interest in these other languages and discussing, maybe, subtle differences between expressions in these other languages and the translation into the target language, then the teachers show awareness and, in fact, cultural empathy and linguistic empathy, which, I think, is crucial. So if you are a student and suppose you come from Ethiopia and the teacher shows interest in an expression in Amharic and you explain what it means and why it is untranslatable in English, because it expresses something so subtle about your culture, there can be many such instances. In fact, it is typically the kind of thing that everybody finds interesting in a classroom when somebody talks about a word or expression in their own language that is untranslatable. And if the teacher accepts that, and if everybody talks about, you know, something about their first language or a cultural custom or something, then that is what creates the bonding in an international class and there is respect for each other's linguistic and cultural background. I think that as a teacher, it is, in fact, your main role to be the conductor of the orchestra, allowing each instrument to play and showing interest in each instrument, and then making them all play together in their own voices, tunes, and accents.

**MS:** One last question—English is nearly becoming a second language for many Indians. Consequently, even though conversing in their first language, people employ many English words in their everyday interactions. In fact, the younger generation is often accused of speaking Hinglish. This does not go down well with the purists and the flag bearers of languages. What is your take on that?

**JMD:** You have the same problem all over the world. You have old people who complain about the younger generations mixing too many other words from other languages. I mean, it is the same everywhere, and purists are, well, you know, I mean, they have a respectable point of view. They want to make sure that you do not lose the cultural and



linguistic heritage. But I cannot stand people who are purists because they are typically also intolerant of diversity and change and if we are applied linguists, then we know that languages change just like people change. We know that if you, as an individual, move to a different country or a different region, you will change linguistically and culturally; you will adapt your behaviour, and that is normal. That is how humanity has evolved over all these years. So we should not try to remain stuck in our linguistic, cultural, or religious past.

**MS:** Thank you so much for all the answers. Also, thank you so much for your patience. Is there anything that you would want to add in the end for language teachers like me?

**JMD:** I would say that for language teachers and researchers, the crucial thing is to enjoy what you do. Enjoy the teaching because you are doing something good for society, and enjoy the research because, again, you are stretching yourself. You are trying difficult things. You are also trying to do some good for society through a better understanding of how everything works.

**MS:** Thank you so much Professor Dewaele for your time. It was an honour talking to you. The answers you gave were extremely insightful and will help language teachers immensely.

**JMD:** Thanks a lot. You actually asked good questions. Good luck with your future research.

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