

The place of translation in Language Teaching

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For a long time the pivotal point of foreign language teaching, translation has been banned from the language classroom for quite a while. Moreover, it has been a frequent object of ridicule by those eager to demonstrate their uncompromising allegiance to modern ways. Nevertheless, it has displayed a remarkable resilience (whether this was necessitated by hard facts of real life, or is the result of the resistance to changes is another matter which deserves to be studied on its own). Translation was abandoned as an option in ESL situations, but not in the state education in many countries. It seems now that the general attitude towards translation has begun to change: those who discuss it in their studies argue that translation is a legitimate pedagogical tool especially in an EFL environment, and claim that it deserves to be rehabilitated (Widdowson 1978:18, Harmer 1991:62, Ellis 1992:46, Bowen, Marks 1994:93; Ur 1996:40). However, they provide little methodological guidance as to how to translate translation into pedagogical practice. The literature on translation deals either with translation theories or translator's training and contains only part of relevant information. Only a small number of works are devoted to translation as an aid to teaching and learning (Duff 1989, Atkinson 1993, Edge 1986, Ulrych 1986, Nadstroga 1988, Urgese 1989, Eadie 1999). The aim of this paper is to draw attention to this void and consider the hows and whys of incorporating translation in regular courses in the light of insights contributed by SLA research, language theories and new psychological perspectives on language learning.

Why use translation?

If a strong case for translation in the language classroom is to be made, at least three things ought to be demonstrated: that criticisms against it are not valid, that learners need it, and that it promotes their learning.

The studies that have tackled commonly made criticisms (e.g. translation teaches learners about language, and doesn't really help them learn how to use it, or that it fosters the excessive use of the mother tongue) have demonstrated that these objections are justified only if translation practice amounts to the regular combination of grammar rules with translation into the target language as the principle practice technique. They have also shown that if properly designed, translation activities can be employed to enhance the four skills and develop accuracy, clarity and flexibility (Duff 1989:7). As regards the use of the native language, its effect on language acquisition has been the subject of many debates lately. Addressing the issues connected with it is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it suffices to say that teachers should constantly bear in mind that in an EFL situation L1 ought to be employed judiciously.

Do learners really need translation?

To rephrase the question following Widdowson's distinction (1983:20), will the learner have to use translation once he has learned L2? The answer to this question is positive, for translation is a real life communicative activity – the learners translate in class for peers, decode signs and notices in the environment, translates instructions and letters for friends and relations, etc. Moreover, with the increased mobility of persons and goods in a unified, multilingual Europe, translation is expected to be practiced almost on daily

basis. In addition, one should not lose sight of Duff's warning that language competence is a two-way system, that we need to be able to communicate into and from the language system. Yet little guidance is given how to communicate back into the mother tongue, something that many professionals need to do in their daily work (Duff 1989:6).

Does translation promote language learning and, ultimately, proficiency?

Put more simply, does it help learners learn the language? The reply is again affirmative. Individual learners have reported that they find it beneficial, and this has been confirmed by empirical research. Investigating learning strategies employed by students of English as a second language, and also by learners of Spanish and Russian in a foreign language setting, O'Malley and Chamot have established that translation (defined as using the first language as a base for understanding and /or producing the second language) accounted for over 30 percent of strategy uses. In both language groups, beginner students mostly rely on repetition, translation and transfer, whereas more advanced students resort to inferencing, though without abandoning familiar strategies such as repetition and translation (1990:127). Taking into account Cook's criticism leveled at the ambiguity of their definition and further controversy concerning the issue whether SLA differs from the acquisition of other forms of knowledge, we would like to stress one fact which has not received enough emphasis: within O'Malley and Chamot's framework, translation is the only strategy typical of language learning, while other strategies they mention occur in other forms of learning. As such, it should receive due treatment.

The other empirical study reporting findings relevant to this topic is Friedlander 1990. Drawing on the results of several investigations and his own experiments, he ascertained that planning on certain language topics seems to be enhanced when writers use the language of topic-area knowledge. Translation from the native language into English appears to help rather than hinder writers: they were able to access more information when working in their first language. Hence, Friedlander concludes that ESL writers should be encouraged to use their first language while composing a draft and then translate (Friedlander 1990: 110-113).

With the growing importance of learner-centered language teaching, it is argued that anything that helps the learner in his or her own way is surely an asset. Hence, researchers and practitioners are urged to investigate what is of assistance to learners in order to help them arrive at their objective in the most economic way. Translation as an aid to learning is likely to be favored by analytically oriented learners.

What kind of translation do learners need?

The purpose of translation in the language classroom is not to train professionals, but to help learners develop their knowledge of English. In other words, it is a means to an end, not an end to be achieved. However, some learners may become translators one day, and the basic knowledge of translation that they have gained in the classroom can serve as a solid ground for building up translation skills.

Level and age

The commonly held view is that translation requires a high level of proficiency. As a cognitively demanding process, it is more appropriate for adult learners. Nonetheless, if properly designed, translation activities can be successfully applied at all levels and ages.

In deciding whether to use it, the teacher should take into consideration the preferences of her learners, her own pedagogical objectives and the moment-by-moment exigencies of the teaching context and situation she is in.

Direction

Translating from L2 into L1 seems to be natural, but what about a more demanding task, rendering L1 into L2? It is certainly advisable to stick to the former mode at lower levels and leave the latter for a more advanced stage, although some very simple L1-L2 translation activities, especially those involving awareness raising, can also be carried out at the initial stages of learning.

Organization

This involves deciding how to administer translation activities, and choosing the most appropriate forms of classroom interaction. Translation is a serious business which requires careful preparation both on the part of the teacher and the learner. Distributing a text and telling your students “translate” is not a very good way to start. Carefully graded preparatory activities are necessary, and they can be integrated in reading, listening and writing activities, and also in vocabulary and grammar practice. Since translation is time consuming, it is advisable that longer pieces should be done at home.

Occasionally, separate classes can be devoted to translation, but only with a highly motivated class. The teacher should ensure that these tasks are done as pair or group work. The purpose of this is to give the learners a chance to discuss, test and compare their ideas.

Content – what to focus on in practice

Almost all authors seem to be in agreement that translation is most useful as a quick and easy way to present the meaning of words and contextualized items, and when it is necessary to draw attention to certain differences that would otherwise go unnoticed (Harmer 1991:162, Ellis 1992:49, Nunan, Lamb 1996:99). Besides this, it is suggested as an appropriate activity in works trying to apply Lakoff’s idea of conceptual metaphors to language teaching (Deignan, Gabry, Solska 1997, Kovecses, Szabo 1996, Lazar 1996, Ponterotto 1994). However, it would be a shame to limit the role of translation only to the presentation of lexical items. One should rather explore ways for its appropriate application within the communicative paradigm, and create challenging language activities which have cognitive depth. Hence, translation activities pursued in an EFL classroom ought to meet the following criteria:

- language is used for a purpose,
- they create a desire for communication,
- they encourage students to be creative and contribute their ideas,
- students are focused on what they are saying, rather than how they are saying it,
- students work independently of the teacher
- students determine what they want to say or write.

(after Nolasco, Arthur 1995:59)

In the literature, two types of approaches to translation are suggested: top-down, from the macro to the micro level, theoretically more valid, and bottom-up, much easier to follow for those who have no previous training in linguistics (Baker 1992:6).

Coursebooks on translation are a useful source for the identification of problematic areas. A systematic framework of that kind is suggested in Baker 1992.

How to integrate translation in existing courses

As previously mentioned, translation activities need not to be pursued in isolation, but should rather be included in existing courses. This paper argues for a multi-directional, or multi-skill integration, as the most effective both in pedagogical and organizational terms. Thus, preparatory activities, or pre-translation activities, should simultaneously be pre-writing, or post-reading, or grammar or vocabulary practical tasks. In addition, translation activities can occasionally be employed for consolidation, while post-translation activities may be focused on rewording, rewriting, revision and evaluation. The following text will illustrate my point in greater detail.

Pre-translation activity

Aim: To integrate translation and reading skills in order to activate schemata

Step 1: The teacher initiates a discussion on the topic to be dealt with in the class. She elicits key words in L2 from the students. She writes the words the students don't know (but which appear in the text) in L1.

Step 2: The students read the text and in pairs or small groups try to find L2 equivalents of the words written on the board

Step 3: The whole class compares results.

Pre-translation activity

Aim: To integrate vocabulary practice and writing with translation.

Step 1: Vocabulary practice.

a) How many of the following verbs can be used with an inanimate object?

b) Try them with the following subject: *This paper*

<i>reveal</i>	<i>aim</i>	<i>consider</i>	<i>examine</i>	<i>document</i>	<i>indicate</i>	<i>show</i>
<i>describe</i>	<i>report</i>	<i>present</i>	<i>identify</i>	<i>develop</i>	<i>maintain</i>	<i>view</i>
<i>stress</i>	<i>contend</i>	<i>comment</i>	<i>state</i>	<i>hold</i>	<i>question</i>	<i>detail</i>
<i>see</i>	<i>put forward</i>		<i>investigate</i>	<i>deal with</i>		

Step 2:

Would you use a direct translation of these collocations in your mother tongue?

Translation activity

Aim: Raising awareness of the role of context and register.

Step 1: Divide the text into three parts, A, B and C; form groups of three and give each a different section to translate.

Step 2: The students who were given the same portion of the text form new groups of three in which they compare and discuss their translations. They also try to agree on a best version.

Step 3: The students go back to their original groups, put the translated text together, discuss it and make necessary changes.

Post-translation activity

Aim: Raising linguistic awareness through translation

Step 1: The students compare and discuss their versions and fill in a comparison chart

Good *Not too bad* *Not good*

(After Atkinson 1993, and Eadie 1999)

Conclusion

Translation seems to be a often used strategy and preferred language practice technique for many students in EFL settings. As such, it undoubtedly has place in the language classroom. However, translation is not a time-saving device. It can be invaluable in provoking discussion and helping us increase our own and our students' awareness of the inevitable interaction between the mother tongue and the target language inevitably occurring in the process of language acquisition.

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