

Translation as English language teaching methodology- To teach or not to teach!

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Abstract

It is widely assumed that the main objective of second language teaching is to concentrate the particular features of the second language in order to get the learners' attention on the theoretical aspect of the language, and to get them as proficient as possible in comparison to a native speaker. In other word, teachers should avoid any reference to the learners' first language as it might cause distraction and disruption to the learning process. However, translation can be understood as general interpretative activity that is always involved in the process of comprehension of the pragmatic meaning not only within one language but also across languages. It is an alternative way to language learning through engaging students in the pragmatic process and in making meaning regardless of the learning form. Consequently, the aim and objectives of learning a second language would be measured not only on how learners are close to native speaker competency but also through the learners' capability for using linguistic resources to pragmatic effect.

Key words: First language (L1), Second Language (L2), acquisition, translation

1. Introduction

This study focuses on the relationship between two activities: translation and language teaching and learning. Generally, it has been believed that teaching the foreign language/second language (L2) should be done in isolation of the first language (L1). Therefore, most language instructors strongly believe that translation could become an obstacle in the way of foreign language acquisition.

For a long time ago, translation was considered a significant part of English language teaching; it was a traditional tool alongside other language teaching methods such as dictation, reading aloud and drills. But with the arrival of the communicative approach to language teaching/learning, the practice of translation method in teaching and other traditional tools soon dropped. However, translation and these other abandoned classroom activities are now a significant aid to learning in many communicative classrooms and have proven successful although the approach to using them has changed.

According to Duff (1989) teachers and students now use translation to learn, rather than learning to translate. Translation activities in modern language classroom usually move from L1 to L2 - although the opposite direction can be observed with more defined objectives- have clear communicative aims, show high motivation levels and can produce impressive communicative results.

2. A historical overview of translation as language teaching methodology

As mentioned earlier in the current paper, translation was the basis of language teaching for decades, and then in later years was rejected as new methodologies started to appear. It was considered a key element of the *Grammar Translation Method*, which evolved from the classical method of teaching Greek and Latin during the time of translation the Bible and great philosophers' books. It was a challenging learning experience for many: learners were required memorizing huge lists of rules and vocabulary, to help them translate whole literary or historic texts word for word. Due to the complicated and challenging traditional translation method used at that time, new methodologies tried to find their way to improve on this. The Direct or Natural Method established in Germany and France around 1900 was a response to the obvious problems associated with the *Grammar Translation Method*. The Direct Method required the teacher and learners to refrain from using the learners' native language and just use the target language. Like the *Direct Method*, the later Audio-Lingual Method involved direct language teaching, without using the L1 to explain new language items.

Subsequent 'humanistic' methodologies such as the *Silent Way* and *Total Physical Response* and *Communicative Approaches* moved even further away from the L1, and from these arise many of the objections to translation.

3. To teach or not to teach

Translation as an activity in EFL classroom is now a feature of many communicative classrooms and successful aids to learning. [Newson](#) (1988) highlighted four disadvantages to using translation as a teaching and testing tool and these as follows:

- (1) It encourages thinking in one language and transferring to another, with accompanying interference;
- (2) It deprives teacher and learner of the benefit of working within a single language;
- (3) It gives false belief of the idea that there is a perfect one-to-one correspondence between languages;
- (4) It does not facilitate achievement of generally accepted aims such as emphasis on the spoken language.

Carreres (2006) has emphasized that by putting forward some arguments against using translation as a language teaching tool claiming that translation:

- Is an exercise that is not considered a tool in communicative approach strategy. Due to the fact that it limits language practice to two skills only: reading and writing.
- It forces learners always to view the foreign language through their mother tongue; which causes interferences and a dependence on L1 that inhibits free expression in L2.
- Translation into L2 is considered useless exercise in the real since translators normally operate into and not out of their mother tongue.
- Translation, particularly into L2, is a frustrating and de-motivating exercise in that the student can never attain the level of accuracy or stylistic polish of the version presented to them by their teacher. It seems to be an exercise designed to elicit mistakes, rather than accurate use of language.

- Translation is a method that may well work with literary-oriented learners who enjoy probing the intricacies of grammar and lexis, but it is unsuited to the average learner.
- Can not be tackled productively without the need to have acquired a significant level of proficiency in the L2 language. Learners need to have moved beyond beginner's level (Marsh, 1987).

Owen (2003) also argues that the rationale against using translation is originated from the fact that learners are obliged to use time assigned to practice L2 in classroom, instead L1 is used which means lack of L2 productivity . Despite of the previous arguments against teaching translation, there are strong arguments for it. Some of which shall be covered in the following paragraphs.

Employing translation in EFL classroom in the past was seen part of the grammar-translation method; it was misconceived and overused. The problem was not in the translation as a teaching method, but the approach to teaching it that detached language from its communicative function. Indeed, translation itself as it takes place in the real world is essentially linked to a communicative purpose. As Duff (1989: 6) recalls:

"Translation happens everywhere, all the time, so why not in the classroom?"

Meaning that the problem in the past was not the translation as a teaching tool, it is rather the instructors that used it badly. The consequence of the violent use of translation resulted in bad reaction against the grammar-translation method in teaching languages.

Also, learners of a foreign language naturally use their mother tongue in acquisition of L2, they "translate silently" (Titford 1985: 78). In light of this, translation into L2 can help them structure and rationalize a learning mechanism that is taking place anyway.

As for the argument which states that learners will not need to translate to L2 in practice and everyday life. In many cases this is the expression of an ideal situation rather than a description of actual practice. It is arguably true that one needs native command of the target language when translating a text. However, in reality EFL learners need to translate into L2 to prepare them for what they might find outside the classroom.

In a language class motivation is required consistently; therefore many researchers agree that translation is a motivating activity. To prove that Carreres (2006) conducted a questionnaire and came out with the conclusion that learners overwhelmingly found translation exercises useful for language learning. As a result to the questionnaire, he decided to introduce translation more substantially in language classes, as it encourages group discussions in which students are in the center of the learning process.

Not only Carreres, Lavault (1985) mentioned that a significant reason pointed out by EFL teachers/instructors to explain their use of translation in the classroom was that students asked for this exercise and enjoyed it too. On a similar scale, Conacher (1996) reported an outstanding feedback from students response to a translation course. Hervey et al. (2002) also gathered enthusiastic feedback from the students attending her translation course at the University of St Andrew's in Scotland.

As for the point of limiting the use of translation to advanced students levels only, Carreres (2006) comments on this stating that “translation activities as forming a continuum between the extremes of literal, explicative translation and that of communicative translation as it takes place in the professional world”. To help English learners grasp a certain L2 structure, translation into L1 is employed and has proven to be very effective.

The way translation is taught makes a difference. Malmkjaer (1998) argues that translation, if taught in a way that resembles the real life activity of translating, can bring into play the four basic language skills and yield benefits in L2 acquisition. He adds that some recent thinking on language learning has stressed the potential of translation as a means of language learning, if the process is regarded as the development of multi-linguistic competence.

Shiyab and Abdullateef (2001) consider translation as a teaching method in EFL class enormously important simply because it encourages conscious learning and control of the foreign language, and as a result, it reduces L1 interference. Translation activity in its nature revolves around students, meaning that students/learners are at the center of the learning/teaching process that can lead to making learning meaningful.

Translation can also be used to teach grammar through demonstrating a comparative approach between structure of L1 and L2, teachers/instructors can show the equivalent and non-equivalent structures between the two languages.

Liao (2006) summarizes the positive aspects of using translation:

- (1) it can help students comprehend L2;
- (2) it can help students to check whether their comprehension is correct;
- (3) it eases memory constraints in memorizing more words, idioms, grammar, and sentence structures;
- (4) it can help students develop and express ideas in another language; and
- (5) it can help reduce learning anxiety and enhance motivation to learn L2.

In summary, the arguments for using translation in the language classroom outweigh the arguments against it as far as teaching English is concerned.

4. EFL Recommended classroom activities for translation

Through my experience as EFL and translation associate lecturer in UK universities, translation was a vital element in the teaching process, a number of activities were used to enhance learning and ensure sustainable learning in and outside classroom. Below a selected list of selected activities for teaching translation in EFL classroom as suggested by the British Council website

4.1 Group and regroup

- Learner groups work on translating different sections of a text, and then regroup to connect together their parts into a full text, with suitable connecting language.
- Learners bring in examples of L1 language (in their own country) or L2 (in another country) for discussion and translation. Signs can be particularly interesting. This can also be done by sharing material via group e-mails.
- Learners bring in short texts/proverbs/poems and present them to the class, explaining why they like them. These are then used for translation.

4.2 Comparisons

- Learners work in groups on short texts then regroup and compare their versions, before producing a final text. This can then be compared with an 'official' published version.
- Learners translate and then other learners back translate, then compare versions and discuss why there are differences (THIS IS A FIVE STAR ACTIVITY) .
- Learners look at 'bad' translations and discuss the causes of errors. (Translation software programs and web pages are good sources of these)
- Ask learners to find different kinds of texts for comparison and translation, for example recipes, e-mails, graffiti, technical texts, post-its, etc.

4.3 Project work

- Learners translate the script of a scene from a film, then dub over the scene itself with their new version in the L2.
- Learners develop a webpage or blog with their own translated work.
- Learners participate in live online forums such as Word Reference.
- Learners research and then present their

- findings on the translations of a particular group of words, such as those of their own professional field.
- Learners evaluate translation software/web pages and then report.
- back to the group.

5. Conclusion

Learners of EFL have a natural tendency to use translation. So instead of attempting to prevent students from using this skill in second language (L2) acquisition, EFL teachers/instructors should help their students to take maximize their benefit of already existing L1 to air acquisition of L2. Research studies and surveys have shown that translation is not merely an efficient learning tool but also a useful teaching method if translation activities are well designed and professionally employed.

On the one hand, students use translation to aid the comprehension process and to reduce insecurity that arises from limited language proficiency. On the other hand, teachers use translation to consolidate what students have learned about the English language, such as vocabulary, sentence structures, and cultural aspects. Integrating translation into task-based activities is a new direction for EFL teachers to consider in the classroom. Translation does not actually equal the instruction of discrete words, phrases, and grammar out of context. Rather, translation can be incorporated into task-based communicative activities in which students can use it as a medium to accomplish tasks, such as translating material about Chinese winter solstice customs and orally presenting it to exchange students from foreign universities.

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- **Webpages:**

- ✚ Translation activities in the language classroom <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/translation-activities-language-classroom>

- ✚ Discussions on the Teaching English site:

- <http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/forum-topic/speaking-students-native-language>



- <http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/articles/from-mother-tongue-other-tongue>



- <http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/talk/questions/use-translation>