

TRANSLATION IN THE CLASSROOM

A Useful Tool for Second Language Acquisition

Module 2 – PG/01/03

What role, if any, should the students' mother tongue play in the language classroom? Discuss, with reference to second language acquisition theory and research findings.

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language acquisition

1 - INTRODUCTION

The use of the students' first language (L1) in the foreign language classroom has been a bone of contention for linguists and teachers alike since the fall from grace of Grammar-Translation as a teaching method. Even though it is still widely used throughout the world, no teaching methodology exists that supports it (Richards and Rodgers:1986:4), and many speak out against it.

The lack of positive literature available on translation use in the classroom, and the negative coverage it receives by the 'experts' and trainers, has certainly made teachers wary of experimenting with it or doing research on it (Atkinson:1987). Does translation in the classroom accelerate or retard the learning process? Does it prevent the students from developing sound second language skills? Does it, in fact, place the classroom in an atmosphere strongly reminiscent of grammar-based learning, anathema to communicatively based methodology?

Without judicious use of translation, there would be few people who would query these concerns. While there may indeed be some negative effects from using translation, this paper takes the position that there is a place in the learning environment for translation. With careful application aimed at specific goals and situations, translation can contribute to the students' acquisition of the target language, at all levels.

This paper's aim is to consider some of the arguments for and against translation and demonstrate how the examples against it do not represent what is currently being proposed, thereby contributing to the myth of translation as an inappropriate tool for second language acquisition (SLA), as well as doing a disservice to the students by denying them access to a learning technique. Furthermore, it will examine how formally and informally applied translation may accord with current teaching methodology.

Formal translation in this paper will be defined as exercises designed by the teacher, and informal translation as the use of the students' mother tongue to elicit language, organize thoughts during small group activities and as a tool to maintain a conversation.

2 - PREVAILING VIEWS ON TRANSLATION

2.1 Arguments against translation

Many valid arguments have been put forth to keep translation out of the classroom. One situation which would appear to hold no place for its use would be in classes consisting of students with differing mother tongues. As there is no single unifying language between the students, translation use would be at the expense of students who do not share that language.

Other arguments presented in training sessions, amongst peers, and certainly enforced at language schools in Japan is that L1 application in the learning process creates a crutch for students. As a result of word-for-word translation, learners develop neither target language (L2) thinking skills nor efficient reading ability, their speech is halting and intra-language errors are embedded.

Harbord (1992) provides further reasons for not using it, citing a return to Grammar-Translation with all of its negative connotations; as well, the isolation of lexis from any real context prevents students from gleaning insight into the multiple uses and meanings of the word. He further contends that in an informal application, translation creates an 'and hierarchy' where the stronger students prevent weaker students from contributing in the L2 by enforcing a feeling of inferiority.

A study by Gorusch (1998) explored 'yakudoku', a form of Grammar-Translation in the Japanese education system, noting the problems it has created. She found that a heavy reliance on translation was at the expense of any form of communication, and an apparent result was that the students "focused the bulk of their attention on the Japanese translations of the English text, rather than the English text itself" (1998:6). Translation in this case was not to learn English, but to demonstrate knowledge of structure. All consideration of the text was done in Japanese.

2.2 - Arguments in Support of Translation

Gorusch's study, while enlightening, is an example of the extreme form of translation which is abhorred by educators and students alike, and is not at all what current advocates of translation are suggesting. Recent articles argue that there is no reason why translation activities cannot be incorporated into a communicatively based lesson, and they promote different activities that suit the different goals and aims of students (Atkinson:1987;Edge:1986;Heltai:1989;Tudor:1986).

Heltai (1989) suggests a guideline for the use of translation, writing that it should be used when translation is an end in itself; when English is a foreign language and not a second language; with students at an advanced level of language ability; for adults who prefer conscious learning; when formal correctness is important and the students are actively interested in acquiring this formality; and when the teacher shares the same L1 as the students. While these scholars may disagree as to with whom and to why translation should be used, there is accord as to how it benefits students and to where it should be used, which is in classes where the L2 is a foreign language and there are few opportunities to experience that language outside of the classroom.

If the translation activities are done in pairs or in small groups, the students must use the target language for negotiation in order to agree on the more appropriate language to

be used (Heltai:1989; Edge:1986). As Heltai explains, for many students, the use of the L2 will be in situations where either neutral or formal language is required, and activities that do not require 'creative spontaneity' yet require transactional language are more appropriate than ones which require more colloquial language. Translation can provide this situation.

Atkinson (1987) suggests that activities that involve some translation promote guessing strategies amongst students and helps reduce the word-for-word translation that often occurs and which results in inappropriate L2 use. Even Harbord concedes that some translation work teaches students to work towards transferring meaning "rather than the word-for-word translation that occurs when the learner's unconscious need to make assumptions and correlations between languages is ignored" (Harbord:1992:354).

Further arguments reason that the use of translation anchors previously learned vocabulary in the mind and helps learners to expand their vocabulary, rather than relying on a limited syntax. This is an argument put forth by Heltai (1989), who states that advanced learners tend to fossilize in their acquisition of vocabulary because they have learned circumlocution skills. Forcing advanced students to search for other words gives such learners a new goal in their studies. Atkinson (1987) applies the same arguments to support translation in classes with learners at an earlier stage of L2 acquisition.

These ideas will be considered further in how they relate to recent SLA theory.

3 - PSYCHO-LINGUISTIC VALUE

Contrary to reasons put forth as to why students should be encouraged to use only the target language in class, informal translation in the class can become a form of peer support for the learners. One reality of the classroom is that the students bring their own L1 strengths into the class and try as one may to create a class where the students are of equal abilities, some students have stronger listening skills than others and some have better comprehension of syntax or lexical items. Denying the use of the first language denies the students access to an important learning tool: other students. Permitting the students to use their L1 enables them to check their understanding of what they have been asked to do, or what another member or the instructor has said. As well, they can help each other organize their ideas or choose a more precise lexical item to explain their thoughts to the class or the teacher. This informal use of translation can become a vehicle for learning and enforcing language and vocabulary because students are drawing on each other's knowledge (Atkinson:1987).

While learners could be encouraged to do this in the target language, the pressure it might put on the student could have negative repercussions with the student choosing to remain ignorant rather than struggle at simply trying to verify what has happened; or, with

students not attempting to help each other. It is doubtful that such a strict rule of 'only target language' is enforced, but it is a position that many teachers in the private language school system often have foisted upon them.

In any case, it is a learner-preferred strategy, as Harbord (1992) concedes, citing reports by Danchez (1982) and DelMar (1982) that beginning students through to the pre-intermediate level will often resort to L1 use. Atkinson (1987) expands on this, stating that even if translation does not actually facilitate learning, it does fit in with students' ideas of what constitutes effective learning, and therefore they are more receptive to it than perhaps more theoretically supported learning activities.

Despite Harbord's fear that this kind of translation use promotes resentment through a structure of hierarchy, students do assert themselves if stronger students are 'helping' too much. It is something that I have noticed in the 'conversation' classes at the language institute where I work, and when students do not 'fight back', it could be attributed to low confidence and therefore low risk-taking threshold.

4 - TRANSLATION IN A TASK BASED LESSON

In his article, Edge (1986) sets out a procedure for how a translation class for advanced learners may be conducted, as is seen below. I feel that it is compatible with current beliefs of Task Based Learning (TBL), which is currently felt to help students utilize and retain all of the second language that they currently possess, as well as build on this knowledge.

Prior to facing the task of translation, students discuss the topic, thus generating potential vocabulary and language they might encounter in the article. Then in small groups, the L2 article is translated into the L1. Groups then exchange the L1 translations and retranslate them into the L2, after which both the original and the translated L2 versions are compared and discussed. The following questions are then considered: Have any important ideas been lost? Does this loss affect the meaning of the text? Have words been changed in the translation, and are these changes important? Have any of the sentence structure alterations affected the meaning and interpretation of the text? Are any changes to the cohesion and coherence important to the meaning?

After this discussion, students decide whether the errors occurred in the L2 to L1 translation or in the reverse, and then they work together to make more appropriate changes.

As Edge was working with learners who would be using translation in the course of their work, this last step would be important for them, but not necessarily for learners who would not be using translation so frequently.

Heltai (1989) concurs with Edge, although he provides suggestions for using oral translation in the class. He feels that by having the students listen to a text and then make an oral translation prior to its reading helps students eliminate negatively transferred errors - students are not doing a word-for-word translation, only a summary and with little consideration time, they are focusing on the meaning only.

In a TBL, students are given a pre-task and then a task to complete. They are expected to draw upon their previously learned language and their own experiences to complete the tasks. This is an unstructured exchange between students and after the exchange, there is time to prepare the information for a 'public presentation'; there is also exposure to authentic material for comparative purposes, and then at the end of the lesson, there is time for language analysis (Willis:1996).

Both Edge's and Heltai's procedures comprise such features, including a pre-task in the form of a pre-discussion, student work on the translation, comparison of their efforts and an analysis of the language. The authentic material is present from the beginning, but their suggestions are very much interactive and very much a far cry from the translation work done in 'yakudoku'.

5 - LEARNER INDEPENDENCE

There has been a conscious move from teachers supplying all of the answers, to the students working with the teacher to understand the L2. As expressed by Odlin (1994:12), it is necessary for students to become independent analysts of the language they are learning simply because what students are exposed to in class is not, generally speaking, sufficient for them to develop proficiency in that language. This independence can be realized with language transfer and contrastive analysis (CAH), expressed in translation.

5.1 - Language transfer, Universal Grammar and Translation

All languages share basic fundamentals, according to Chomsky's Universal Grammar theory (Cook:1994). While languages may differ in their word order or in what elements may be dropped from a construct, they are indeed similar. Languages are comprised of aspects of plurality, nouns, objects and other such linguistic components; they are built on what surrounds us physically and emotionally, and the combinations are not limitless. We learn the rules when we learn our first language and we apply them to any other language we learn. As a result of this language transfer, "... the concepts themselves do not need to be taught in many cases, only the English realizations of them..." (Hubbard:1994:55).

Yet, language transfer can have both positive and negative results in the target language being learned 'correctly', and 'incorrectly', with the L1 structure and vocabulary causing interference for the learner. While there is both positive and negative interference, "It has been common in second language teaching to stress the role of interference...for

native language interference is surely the most immediately noticeable source of error... however...the native language...is often positively transferred..." (Brown:1994:90).

The theme of language transfer is dealt with by James (1994) and Cook (1994). The positive transfer of L1 to L2 makes "explanations compatible with the learner's prior knowledge" (James:1994:208). Learners bring with them their own meta cognition and meta language from their L1 to help them describe, compare and explain the L2 to themselves, enabling them to analyze the language more. If students are encouraged to analyze the L2 language and consciously compare it to their own language, they may notice patterns that make sense to them, thus better understanding the structures and uses of the language; hence early L2 fossilization may be prevented. Both James (1994:208) and Cook (1994:29) cite France as an example of this move to integrate both the students' native language and foreign language in L2 studies.

An example of how learner independence can be accomplished with language transfer and translation was demonstrated by Tudor (1986), whose students worked in a completely L1 atmosphere. Students were assigned a task in which they had to prepare a presentation that was based upon material from their work. The translation work was completed at home and the presentation given in English. Tudor claims that in order to accomplish this task, the learners were "obliged...to acquire new L2 resources to explore new areas of the expressive use of that language...stretching learners' existing competence in a controlled manner..."(1986:27).

Tudor noted that those students who accessed L1 and L2 material, therefore translating and cross-referencing material, produced more coherent presentations with more appropriate language than those who had little time to do so and could use only what language was currently active in their minds.

Edge (1986) provides his own examples and affirms that learner independence develops with translation exercises. While he and Heltai (1989) advocate translation being done with teachers who share the students' L1, a lack of fluency does not hinder the activity. Edge believes that learners accept the responsibility of verifying the accuracy of what others produce, pushing them to think in and about the target language even more.

While both of these examples are of intermediate to advanced level learners studying English for specific purposes, Baynham (1985) reports that similar aims can be met with lower level students. By students collectively translating their country's folk stories into English, they searched for the correct ways to express the story that would keep it interesting. As the instructor did not speak the students' L1, it was up to the students to ensure 'accuracy', even with their limited language skills.

Atkinson (1987) suggests that translation is useful for both the presentation of new language and for reinforcement of structures previously learned, emphasizing the fact that

including time for accuracy is just as important as fluency. He believes that instead of 'How can I say _____ in L2?', teachers should encourage 'How can I express _____ in L2?' One activity mentioned is having the students look at L1 phrases or words from a previous activity that they had had difficulty expressing - the language is therefore something that they had produced - and in pairs come up with an L2 expression that could have worked. Their choices do not need to be precise L1-L2 dictionary equivalents as the goal is to help students develop communication strategies for expressing ideas.

5.2 - Contrastive Analysis and Translation

The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) was developed in the 1950's out of linguists' concern over negatively transferred L1 elements. It has undergone changes over the years as it was proven to be ineffective at what it was supposed to do: predict language transfer errors so that they could be dealt with before they occurred (Brown:1994).

Today, first and second languages are contrasted so that learners can establish "where exactly the communication norms of L2 diverge from...L1" (Titford:1981:52). While some teachers do this using only the target language, others advocate CA via translation (Titford:1981; Edge:1986).

Rutherford states that CA has positive effects because learning occurs when the subject matter "can be meaningfully related to something that is already known" (1987:16). For advanced students, such as in Edge's (1986) and Heltai's (1989) classes, this comparison could take place, and indeed it does, in English. However, for beginning level students, the sole use of the L2 may not relate it to the L1 in a way that would enable the learner to learn. This comparison demonstrated in both languages is more beneficial in this instance. In his article, Westney (1994) argues in defense of 'rules of thumb'; at the same time, he admits that it is indeed difficult for the teacher to supply those rules which are both easy to understand and apply, yet which are also comprehensive. For this reason, he advocates students discerning rules that join their L1 knowledge about language and grammar with the target language on their own.

This is in itself fraught with danger as students creating their own rules can lead to incorrect rules or over-generalizations of lexis and syntax use. CA via translation does not eliminate the danger of such generalizations, but it could lower the chance for errors. Students would not be forming rules based on sentences that they may not be correctly interpreting. They would know exactly what the sentences mean because of the translation. For students who are either unsure of themselves or who still do not have a solid base of grammar and vocabulary, this is a useful tool,

As was demonstrated in the Pedagogic Grammar Module's course book (1997:18), rules for some basic elements of Portuguese and Tamil grammar can be deduced by comparing

example sentences with the English equivalents. No rules were forced upon the readers that could either confuse or mislead the students. Simply by comparing the L1 sentences with the TL, we were able to figure out the rules for plurality and word order for ourselves.

Of course, this does not imply that I can apply these rules to speaking either Tamil or Portuguese; however, as a tool of discovery, and being able to relate an unknown language to something that I do know very well, the translation was effective. It created a construct that, with practice and reinforcement, might become a part of a new language's database.

5.3 - An Informal Case Study

Many Japanese students confuse their use of the auxiliary verbs 'be/do/have', and produce sentences such as 'I am a big house.' Knowing that adult learners have had at least six years of English grammar, it is doubtful that an explanation of the three verbs would not effect a change, as there is a direct correlation between English and Japanese where these verbs are concerned.

With a group of first year university students, I attempted a CA - translation exercise to try to help them deal with this particular problem. They were given some sentences in English, with the translation beside them. The students were required to identify words associated with the auxiliary verbs, and 'discover' the common words in Japanese. For example,

Where **do** you *live*? Doko ni *sundeimasuka*?

Do you *study* every weekend? Maishu shumatsu *benkyoo shimasuka*?

Are your classes interesting? Jyugyoo wa omoshiroi **desuka**?

Is he your friend? Kare wa tomodachi **desuka**?

What **is** your favourite dish? Ichiban sukina ryoori wa nan **desuka**?

Once the students make the relationship between 'be' and 'desu', and 'do + v' and 'v + masu', they look surprised but nod their heads in agreement. There are some instances where there is no such correlation, for example,

Do you *like* Aomori's winter? Aomori no fuyu wa *suki desuka*?

However, as students learn that 'like' is a verb in English, the understanding of this should not pose a problem, especially if markedness in a language is more easily learned than unmarkedness (Cook:1994).

I have done similar activities to clear up this problem with adult learners who have been out of school for at least four years, and all the students grasp the relation immediately. It is an activity that has taken about five minutes, depending on the size of the class, and both students and I feel like something has been accomplished. This does not mean that

the students do not make the same mistakes, but when a question is asked regarding what they have written or said, they quickly self-correct. All of the students were asked if the correlation had ever been made, and they all said no; yet, a simple act of translation cleared up the misunderstanding in a very short time. Of course, not everything is as simple, but translation did help.

6 – Summary

While most literature available in support of the use of the mother tongue in the class appears to favour its use with advanced level learners, it is possible to apply it to classes for students with lower language skills, if it is prudently used.

Translation can be combined with TBL lessons and CA, and it is compatible with theories on Universal Grammar and learner independence. Translation incorporated into a communicatively based lesson can be a useful tool for both the students and the teacher, helping the students to relate the TL to the L1, as well as fostering an atmosphere of peer support and student centered learning.

Many valid arguments against translation do exist and will persist to relegate translation to the backwaters of SLA theories. Without careful and thoughtful application of the students' L1 in the class, excessive dependence on translation will permeate the language classroom, with no language goal being attained. However, the language teacher should make available whatever resources exist if what language is used to negotiate meaning is important for what students learn. If translation aids the student in relating the L2 with the L1, then it is good. If it helps students realize where their mistakes are developing or how others may interpret what they are saying in the L2, then it is something to consider (Edge:1984).

7 - CONCLUSION

There is no conclusive 'evidence' to demonstrate that translation in the classroom can aid learners in their studies, nor that the benefits of translation carry more weight than methodologies that do not use it. For those teachers and linguists who do not favour translation, their minds will not be easily swayed and for those who do see it's uses, arguments as to why it should not be used will also fall on deaf ears. It is a methodology that appeals only to some people. However, with the material that is being tested by a few teachers, it is hoped that more people will consider the potential usefulness of translation as an aspect of language learning, experiment with it, and provide more information that will enable instructors to make a more informed decision about it, rather than basing their disapproval of translation on the extreme applications that have been seen to date.

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