

# **The role of translation in the EFL / ESL classroom**

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The role of translation in the ESL and EFL classroom has and will continue to be a hotly debated issue. Many teachers and linguists assume that translation doesn't belong in the classroom because it doesn't embody making full use of the target language. Recent studies, such as Daulton (1999) on the use of loan words and Roca (1992) looking at translation usage in bilingual classrooms have illustrated some new ideas that may allow controlled translation usage. Finally, a combination of approaches such as a novel idea offered by Weschler (1997), an ESL teacher in Japan, proposing the newly coined "Functional-Translation Method", may usher in a new way of using the students' native language to help them learn a target language in an EFL classroom.

- 1 This paper will first explore the literature background that will look at several studies relating to the usage of translation in the classroom in various forms. Next a section examining some of these studies in detail offering a few viable approaches to be used in the classroom. After, a section portraying an example of the pitfall of an over-reliance on translation is illustrated. Then a section offering several alternative approaches and justifications for their use will follow. Next, a section of techniques applying some of these approaches will be shown for using translation to promote improvement of students' receptive and productive skills. Finally, a section denoting limitations and suggestions for further study as well as concluding remarks will follow.

## **2 Literature background**

Translation as used in bilingual immersion programs is widely seen in many American schools. In the National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning (NCRCDSSL) report, Genesee (1987) and Harley et al. (1990) found that English speakers do well academically in an immersion program. Also in the NCRCDSSL report, Collier (1994) found Hispanic students in urban areas using bilingual programs showed longer-term educational gains compared to students in other programs.

These bilingual programs follow different language formats, the two most popular being the “50/50” model and the “90/10” model. The “50/50” model incorporates students receiving equal amounts of time of both the target and their native language, whereas the “90/10” model emphasizes time spent on the target language at 90%.

Kern (1994) conducted an interesting study whereby he looked at the role of translating as a cognitive strategy in the L2 (second language) reading comprehension process. Kern found that students often used translation to understand the text. Cook (1992) also added that second language learners use their L1 (first language) while processing an L2. Her idea that an instructor must not separate the L1 from the L2, but instead should make use of the L1 while instructing the student.

Zilm (1989) in Edwards et al. (1996) looked at the use of code switching in a study of students learning German. He found that the nature of the activity and the teacher's perception of how students learned were two of five important factors affecting code switching. This switching of languages embodies an idea of translation and bilingualism.

A look at Daulton's (1999) study with loan words reveals a strong possibility for students to be helped by studying them. Loan words are words that have been adopted from another language, in this case from English into Japanese.

Adopted words sometimes run a risk of changing their meaning in the new language (hence in a form, translated) but overall, Daulton found they speeded the learning of necessary vocabulary for communication and understanding.

By having students focus on a corpus of approximately 2,000 high-frequency English vocabulary items, students will gain many useful words quickly.

One case of an over-dependence and misapplication of translation in the classroom is "yakudoku" which loosely translates as "reading translation" from Japanese. Hino's (1988) statements about the Yakudoku Method tell us it is a direct translation system used in Japan to teach any foreign language. Hino goes on to add that this system is rooted in a social context in Japan, and this method of learning a foreign language has not been modified even when it's been found to be of dubious value. Students are unable to directly understand the meaning in the target language as reported by Ueda (1979) in Hino's paper.

Next will continue a further discussion of the Yakudoku Method as a good illustration why translation should be used carefully and more fully integrated into an ESL or EFL program.

### 3 Example of a misapplication of translation: The Yakudoku Method

Care in using a translation approach must be taken. One example of misuse of a translation approach would be the aforementioned Yakudoku Method used in Japan. Though Japan's Ministry of Education does not officially endorse it, yakudoku has strong sociolinguistic ties within the education system of Japan. In surveys conducted by the Japan Association of College Teachers as related by Koike et al. (1983, 1985) in Hino's paper, approximately 70-80% of Japanese teachers of English in high schools and universities in Japan used the Yakudoku Method.

The Yakudoku Method was originally derived for studying Chinese in Japan some one thousand years ago, as noted by Suzuki (1975) in Hino's paper. In some cases, Japanese characters are directly derived from their Chinese counterparts, making the translation easier. Still, this leads to problems in using and studying a language in a format related to that used to study Greek and Latin. These languages were studied as dead languages, where by reading and writing skills were exclusively worked on using the grammar-translation method as noted by Tonkyn (1994). But the larger problem is one of regulating the study

of the target language to one of a subset of the native language; in this case Japanese, as noted and translated from Japanese by Hino (1988). So, Japanese students come to believe that translating everything is necessary and communication itself is totally de-emphasized.

Not only is this method slow, requiring excessive reading, but also of course it severely impedes any comprehension of the target language. Unfortunately, Japanese students using this system also tend to employ it to listen, write and speak English or another foreign language. Thus, all skill areas suffer as students struggle to translate sentences word-by-word thus slowing down all language skills, both productive and receptive as noted by Hino (1988).

Next, a contrast to the Yakudoku Method will be shown by the presentation of some viable alternative approaches. Their pros and cons will be examined in light of recent findings that have been made.

## **4 Approaches for using translation in the classroom**

### **4.1 Bilingual immersion**

The idea of using bilingual immersion is a tempting one, only to be constrained by budgetary and bilingual instructor availability concerns. In the sense that it isn't verbatim translation, it still implies that students are able to approach bilingualism. The concept is to fully translate a whole class within a subject category. A point to note would be that certain subjects more readily fit within this formulaic approach. ESL or EFL students learning math or music in English would fare better than trying to study history under the same format. Newly arrived immigrants with inadequate language skills in their new home's national language may take good advantage of a bilingual immersion approach to learn their L2 quickly.

Within the context of bilingual lectures, the idea of note taking in L1 springs to mind. The students are translating directly what they've heard in L2, English, and denoting the gist in L1. Students have found 1) the note taking was easier in L1 and 2) their understanding upon review was maximized, in terms of time and brevity. Since Benoussan and Rosenhouse (1990) note that students tend to translate from L2 to L1 when reading L2 texts, why not take advantage of this within the context of an immersion program. Urgese (1989) and Parks (1982)

note that translation can be used as a good way to teach and test comprehension, especially of the main ideas within the text.

One of the other major advantages of the bilingual immersion programs is the easing of cultural assimilation. Quite often, cultural factors are overlooked in a teacher's efforts to have students improve, as noted by Cohen and Norst (1989) in Nimmannit's (1998) online paper. Students who feel unconfident and insecure will not be ideal learners and certainly will be less open to absorbing the class content. The National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning (NCRCDSSL) reported that Cazabon, Lambert, and Hall (1992) studied students in the Amigo program (a bilingual immersion program) for Cambridge Public Schools in the United States. In general, their results indicated that students were more culturally adjusted and were able to score higher on tests than their native speaking counterparts.

## 4.2 Co-teaching

A related idea is co-teaching. In Taiwan, a children's school that I was employed with used this system. Children received two hours of English instruction a week, one delivered by the native English instructor in English with minimal translation and the other hour taught by a native Taiwanese instructor with drills and pair practice in English, but with grammar explanations in Chinese.

Holmes and Brown (1987) in Brown (1994) state there are problems with teaching subtle cross-cultural differences. This co-teaching approach allows

students to make use of both their native and target language grammars. Skiba relates that Cook (1991) also adds that code switching may be used within the context of teaching English as a second or foreign language. Cook offers up some palatable examples of code switching usage activities where students might use the second language to obtain some information from a text or an audio message and then answer comprehension questions in the first language. I saw this process used in some portions of the Taiwanese teacher led class. The teacher often checked comprehension by asking for the Chinese equivalent of the English phrase or word within a passage or sentence being studied.

Furthermore, matching the material used with students' backgrounds can easily facilitate a guided negotiation of meaning. By choosing texts and topics that are more readily relatable to student's cultural backgrounds, the EFL instructor ease students' recall of the text as students will be able to access their own schemata to process the ideas presented in readings or discussions as noted by Rumelhart (1977).

Holliday (1994) explored an aspect of tying consciousness-raising and cultural awareness together. Holliday found that using BANA methodology (Methodologies derived and used in English speaking environments Britain, Australasia, and North America.) in countries with dissimilar cultures resulted in a rough adjustment for students and teachers. Certainly this style of teaching doesn't take into account the learners' mindsets as influenced by their cultural backgrounds. Edwards et al. (1996) relates that some forms of consciousness

raising seem to contribute to shortening the delay of students in learning sentence structures. I feel that this co-teaching approach may alleviate some aspects of culture shock as well. Many students experience some dissonance when studying a language as they examine the differences between their own culture and the target language's culture. Certainly if they don't reach a shock level, they may experience culture stress as related by Stevick (1976) in Holland and Shortall (1997).

#### 4.3 Using Bilingual text

The use of bilingual text in the classroom may be a boon or an omen for an ESL teacher. The idea being that students sometimes need a crutch to support their ascendancy towards native-like fluency may raise eyebrows amongst BANA authorities. What's crucial to examine is the absorption time, i.e., the time needed to actually learn vocabulary and structures for functional use.

My work in Hong Kong and Taiwan focused on using bilingual material to aid reading comprehension, especially in ESP classes. Students ranged in age from 9 to 53. Types of material ranged from elementary material employed for learning colors, numbers, etc., to material discussing newspaper or magazine article topics. In all cases, I found students were more confident and obtained a better understanding of said vocabulary as shown by their administered test results before and after the onset of English learning using a bilingual text approach.

Test measures included TOEIC, TOEFL, and standard HKCEE (Hong Kong's standardized entrance exam) and Taiwanese academic entrance exams.

In general, I found students achieved a general versus specific understanding. I emphasized to them not to translate word for word but to have a general grasp of the vocabulary or phrase so as to be able to apply it in a sentence or dialogue of their own making. In a sense, this is enabling the learners to develop an interlanguage as a middle ground. Willis (1997) presents Lightbown (1985) who talked about a learner facing a complex task. In the context of remembering, a teacher doesn't want a student to understand and process all the input, just enough input to get the contextual gist. Native speakers employ the same technique when decoding sentences in conversation. They don't latch on to every single utterance, as some words have less effect on meaning.

Now a teacher employing bilingual text shouldn't overemphasize the native language text. He doesn't need to read it for the students. The only translation should be a written one. All of the student's verbal input should be in English. By using Carter's (1987) definition in Willis (1997), allowing lots of exposure to the target language in a range of contexts will aid comprehension but it won't necessarily lead to production. It seems ESL or EFL instructors need to examine the concept of context. Brown (1994) talks of misplaced context where a student misapplies 'book' knowledge through an overuse of formality. Teachers must be cautious in teaching oral forms and their written equivalents. Students often are not aware of subtle differences in meaning, some because of cultural differences.

Studies done on text structure affecting comprehension, such as Bean, Potter and Clark (1980), and Carrell (1984) have shown there are real differences in students' recall of material based on the alignment of the ideas presented compared to the students' cultural backgrounds.

The use of bilingual text cuts down on the time needed to learn vocabulary and hence, the time needed to reach a better reading comprehension level.

Laufer (1996) felt that based on his research, L2 learners generally rely on vocabulary to help them negotiate meaning in text and speech. Laufer continues with comments about a minimum threshold to use guessing effectively would be about the 3000 word family level. That is what is needed by a reader to successfully understand and use a contextual guessing strategy successfully. Students though, eventually need to recognize that truly knowing a word involves relating that word to other words in a number of ways as mentioned by Cook (1991) in Skiba. Now, as Brown (1987/1994) in Willis (1997) points out, whether students may over-generalize using inductive reasoning to apply to circumstances that don't follow a certain rule of use or fit a particular contextual meaning is more difficult to determine.

Teachers warning students of multiple meanings may suitably head off over-generalization. In this case, pointing up multiple meanings of words in a student's own language will serve as a consciousness raiser. Students should be made aware of the fact that all languages share some common aspects, i.e., sentences, grammatical structure, general and specific vocabulary.

One important aspect of learning to read in the bilingual text approach is looking at grammatical structures. As pointed out by Leech (1994) in his article “Students’ Grammar-Teachers’ Grammar-Learners’ Grammar“, students must be reminded of differences between their native language and the target language. The teacher may assist students in pointing out structural differences.

The methods used to do this may vary. Certainly doing it by direct oral translation will prove to be extremely difficult for most teachers. More importantly, students need to be made aware of the situation, not necessarily understand all structural differences. The idea as underlined by Leech (1994) based on Anderson (1975) and Aitchison (1987/1992) is to teach rule of thumb shortcuts. This will allow students to proceed from central tenets to more peripheral ones. In other words, teach the common core of examples first, later adding the special cases.

Another important aspect to keep in mind with using bilingual text is the learner’s favored approach to studying. Reid (1987) found that Japanese students were the least auditory of the students as reported in a questionnaire. Asian cultures including Korean, Chinese, and Japanese, emphasize the memorization of their writing systems which take far longer to master because of the number of building elements. Whereas English incorporates a mere twenty-six blocks (the alphabet), written systems in Korean, Chinese, and Japanese use on average 2,000 characters simply to represent sentences in common newspaper stories (Scholars may use 10,000 to 15,000 characters.).

This would seem to account for students favoring a visual approach in learning vocabulary and sentence structures because of the amount of memorization required to learn their own L1.

#### 4.4 Combination approaches

An interesting alternative is to combine some of the approaches mentioned such as the usage of bilingual immersion and bilingual text. Some of the bilingual immersion programs in international schools have adopted this approach as evidenced by my contact with students in international schools in Hong Kong and Taiwan. At commercial schools in Taiwan and Hong Kong, some of them use bilingual textbooks and co-teachers as a way of coping with time limitations.

Another approach is Weschler's (1997) proposal, which suggests using a hybrid of the grammar-translation method combined with a communicative method. Of course, adults can learn using an "English only" approach, but serious constraints involving time, limited ESP goals, and the ideal circumstances seriously limit the potential possibilities. As mentioned earlier, the idea of transplanting BANA technology from ESL countries to EFL countries causes major problems.

The idea of using the native language to translate idea for idea rather than word for word is not a novel idea. But Weschler makes some convincing arguments that EFL courses need to use a different methodology than ESL classes.

Next will follow some suggested techniques to use translation approaches within the classroom.

## 5 Suggested activities

Activities to be used are numerous and varied. Some follow and are explained in some detail. Bear in mind, these are generally intended for EFL use, not ESL use, because of the possible need to translate in to multiple languages for ESL classes.

### 5.1 Lost in the translation

This activity is a variation of one of Weschler's (1997) ideas for an activity. First form a circle of up to 10 seated students. All students will receive a number from 1 to 10. Each even numbered student will receive a different English sentence written across the top of a piece of paper given to him or her. Odd numbered students will each receive one of the same English sentences translated into a native language sentence, also written on the top of a piece of paper. Students then proceed to translate the main idea of the sentence and write their translation

below the original sentence. Students then fold the paper over concealing the original sentence, only showing their translated version of the sentence. The students will then each pass their papers in a clockwise fashion, again repeating the same process of folding to conceal the sentence that a student has read to write his translated sentence. Continue until a piece of paper has completed the circle or until the teacher decides to stop the activity (based on time or other factors).

Now students examine what meaning has been lost in the translation of the sentences. This helps students to not only improve their vocabulary base, so necessary for accessing meaning, but it also allows students to participate in a consciousness raising activity concerning grammatical and contextual structures in their own native language and the L2, English. As an expansion activity, students may try to figure out how some of the sentences could be used in a dialogue. Examining which ones would fit, both contextually and meaningfully, will help students to recognize subtle structural differences in sentences related to wording and usage of idiomatic phrases. Then students could act out some of the dialogues constructed in English with suitable translation written down through group work. This will allow students to gain useful production practice, necessary to improve their speaking skills.

## 5.2 Bilingual dialogues

This technique employs pairing students off. One receives a native language version of a dialogue, the other an English version of the same dialogue. Then both students attempt to translate the dialogue. Later, the two students will compare results and act out the English dialogue. Depending on student levels, the discussion about the translated dialogues may be held in the students' native language or in English. Again, this is another activity that serves as a consciousness raiser in comparing a student's L1 with his or her L2. Students will generally be able to access their L1 and use it to learn new vocabulary by translating. This activity is also useful for pointing up built-in redundancies in language whereby there are numerous ways to express the same meaning. Finally, the acting out of the English dialogue offers the students production practice that is necessary for improving their speaking skills.

### 5.3 Role-plays with native language brainstorming

This is a technique where a set of English discussion phrases are usually pre-taught and practiced. Students now break into brainstorming groups to develop strategies for their later discussion with an opposing group. The students for their brainstorming may use L1. After, students seeking additional appropriate English vocabulary and sentences for the discussion may ask the teacher for help. Students should consult Japanese-English dictionaries first, attempting to formulate expressions themselves. The teacher should point out some distinctions in meaning or formality for some words to be used in the discussion.

Students, depending on their level of familiarity with the topic, may also be given a list of possible strategies and/or positions that they may use in later discussion sessions. Finally, the students prepare for the discussion practicing the English expressions the teacher has given them before getting to the discussion itself. The teacher should follow with a critique of the discussion. This might include; presentation sequencing, word usage, grammar errors, body language, etc. Now may be included a further discussion of cultural differences related to the subject discussed or the situation and how it would differ in the L1.

Students benefit from this activity in a number of ways. First, they improve their ability to formulate a strategy. Secondly, they work on their dictionary usage skills with the teacher introducing different levels of appropriate language. Thirdly, students can gain useful vocabulary and phrases within a contextual framework with examples provided by the teacher and other classmates. Fourthly, students gain needed production practice for improving their speaking in a conversational format. Lastly, students will be introduced to L1 and L2 cultural differences by the teacher's critique of their discussion concerning presentation, word usage, etc. and any follow up discussion.

Next, a section considering shortcomings and possibilities for further study of translation usage in the ESL or EFL classroom and conclusions will round out this report.

## 6 Conclusions

The useful aspects of translation when employed in an ESL or EFL classroom as discussed earlier encompass several key themes. Translation should be used to foster and take advantage of a student's natural ability to assimilate L2 (second language) information via their L1 (native or first language) processing. Through the usage of bilingual immersion, co-teaching, bilingual text usage, or a combination of approaches such as Weschler's "Functional-Translation Method", a teacher can also increase a student's confidence and security levels. In addition, consciousness raising aids the student's ability to recognize similarities and dissimilarities between the L1 and L2; culture, language structure, use of specific and general vocabulary, and the order of presentation of information.

By reducing cultural related problems, such as culture stress or shock, teachers increase the likelihood that students will more easily absorb taught material and enjoy the learning experience, enhancing any recognition of the use of a language as a communication and a social bonding tool. The usage of the student's already existing L1 to facilitate the learning of L2, English, rather than simply attempting to discard or ignore this latent language processing and

structural knowledge, can lead to quicker gains and better long term retention of English by the students.

## 6.1 Limitations

Limitations of translation related approaches certainly would encroach upon areas related to maximizing comprehensible L2 input. Approaching in a Yakudoku Method would not be recommended, but neither is a BANA related approach with a total lack of awareness by the teacher of the students' backgrounds or the nationalities of the participating students. Still, an additional difficulty to overcome is to make sure students really understand a word. In this sense, bilingual text stumbles. Looking at Carter (1987) as related by Willis (1997), Carter expostulated that high frequency words tend to have a lot of different meanings. Because a student understands the word "go" in the sentence "Let's go." doesn't mean that the student fully appreciates other contextual meanings of the word. Or for that matter various meanings implied in the sentence depending on word stress and situational factors.

In other words, an ESL or EFL teacher must attempt to influence the amount of guessing those students use to recognize unknown words from context. Guessing is used and encouraged by research into L1 reading done by Johnson and Bauman (1984) with many of the studies demonstrating its value. The other

idea is that students may use skills such as interpreting surrounding text, predicting, and testing predictions while reading to increase their understanding of a text. But, a note of caution is in order. Gough (1984) discusses whether students are really reading or not. He goes on to add that students may use guessing as a coping strategy to compensate for problems in recognizing words.

Of course, another limitation to note is what tests such as TOEFL, TOEIC, and HKCEE really measure. Gilfert (1996) related that quite often these tests are used to screen students for purposes not directly related to what the initial tests were designed for. The Educational Testing Service (ETS) which designed TOEIC and TOEFL, offers the test as an effective way to measure English receptive skills. Quite often, though, it is mistakenly used as a way to measure a person's general ability to use English in real life situations.

## 6.2 Suggestions for further study

Suggestions for further studies would include a further examination of the relevance of TOEIC and TOEFL scores to communicative ability. Another possible aspect to examine would be co-teaching, which has been primarily looked at within the auspices of special education rather than ESL or EFL.

Hopefully, the use of translation can be utilized in a complementary way that dovetails with the ESL or EFL program being used. If it is fully integrated rather

than haphazardly attached as an afterthought, the instructor and the students involved with its usage will reap far greater benefits.

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