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The Role of Translation in Language Teaching

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Introduction

Translation is a fundamental human activity in the sense that in all perceptual and cognitive acts there is always translation from one mode or level to another mode or level. In every act of perception or cognition, there is both translation and creation. It is more so in linguistic acts.....in creation there is a translation from inner to the outer language.

(Chellappan 1983, p.57)

Although translation was a central method of language learning used for thousands of years, with the advent of behaviourist theories and intralingual (or unilingual) techniques in the late fifties and early sixties it fell out of favour being as Duff says 'sent to Siberia' (1989, p.5). Attempts to use translation were 'denounced as didactic folklore' (Wilss 1983, p.243) because they went against the reigning methodologies. Subsequent theories when not prohibiting it from their methodology simply ignored it. (Kupczyk-Romanczuk 1995, p.76) However its use never totally disappeared from the classroom and in more recent times the use of translation is reemerging both in the classroom and in language teaching methodology. The new attitude to translation was summed up by Wills (1983, p.245) 'The limited capacity of a language learner cannot exhaustively be exploited, if the learning process is exclusively geared to unilingual imitative procedures'. Translation is now seen to have a variety of uses in language teaching from testing, learning vocabulary and error analysis to being a valuable tool for expanding the depth of L2 understanding

and the associated L2 culture. No matter what the teacher believes and even if the use of translation is proscribed in the classroom and by the teaching methodology it is a natural activity that a language learner will at some time use in his path to learning another language.

Definition

Urgese (1989, p.38), a supporter of the view that translation is no longer a sin in language teaching, defines translation as 'any transfer, for any reason of any text from one language code to another code' (1989, p.38). This definition covers any form of translation both written and spoken as well as different types of translation literal, free and simultaneous. Stern (1992) sees translation as the principal technique of the crosslingual strategy in Language teaching and the absence of it a requirement of the intralingual strategy.

History

Stern (p.75) and Duff (1989, p.5) point out that translation is the oldest method of language teaching and has been used for centuries. The grammar–translation method, where literary translation and explanation of L2 features in L1, are central teaching methods, are currently extensively used today in the teaching of English in both high school and tertiary education in many countries in Asia and other places. Although attempts in many of these countries are being made to widen the scope of language teaching from their high dependence on the grammar–translation method, The grammar–translation method adapted with some oral work (Brown 1980, p.241), remains the dominant force for their millions of language learners.

Artificially teacher devised sentence translation exercises illustrating grammar features, rote learning of vocabulary lists, reading and literal translation exercises are key techniques in these

crosslingual methods. Problems with the grammar–translation method, and its lack of success in achieving communicative fluency are well known and evident in students who have come through that system. Duff (1989, p.5) points out that the way translation is used in this method has degenerated to being a ‘pointless routine exercise, a chore and a punishment’ and that this has led to the unpopularity of translation in language teaching. Wilss (1983, p.244) expresses similar ideas and lists some further pitfalls with the grammar–translation method such as its teacher centeredness, its benefit to only a limited number of students, and its lack of ‘precisely formulated and functionally founded learning targets’. He goes on to point out how ‘translation is a specific skill which is clearly different from the four traditional foreign language skill’ and also that ‘translation is a difficult and complex form of language performance overtaxing the average language learner’. Both of these factors, he believes contributed to the fall from favour of the grammar–translation method and unpopularity of translation in language teaching that still persists today.

In the sixties Behaviourist and Communicative theories of language, including the Direct method, rejected the artificiality of the grammar–translation method and advocated that language teaching should be as natural as possible, leading to an almost complete rejection of the use of translation. Translation was seen as a negative factor and a hindrance to learning a L2 therefore its use, was not only discouraged, but also prohibited. Successful language teaching was seen to be achieved by only using L2 to establish meaning. Teachers, following these methodologies, were in a position of feeling as if they had failed if they resorted to translation to explain a language point or some vocabulary and deviated from the dominant line of carrying out all teaching in L2. These methodologies did not prove perfect and the complete total rejection of translation in language teaching did not prove a practical reality, especially in a monolingual classroom.

Finocchiaro (1973, p.19 quoted in Parks 1982, p.241) taking the negative view against the use of translation but explaining why it was impossible to eliminate it from the classroom said 'It is generally recognised that older students, certainly those about the age of ten and above, immediately think of the native language equivalent for a concept or word they are learning. The intermediate step of translation takes place whether or not we want it.' Nevertheless intralingual strategies remained the preference in language teaching for many years despite as Stern (1992, p.76) says 'occasional concessions to crosslingual strategies' and only more recently is it gaining in popularity as part of a 'multidimensional, integrative language teaching methodology' (Wilss 1983, p.245).

Theory

The consensus from those advocating the use of translation and crosslingual strategies is not that these methods should be exclusive and replace intralingual strategies but that they should supplement them. Stern in his comprehensive article on translation admits 'One can state axiomatically: if any degree of L2 proficiency is to be attained, an intralingual strategy must be used.' (1992, p.79) but goes on to say 'this does not mean to say that all crosslingual procedures at all times are unhelpful in the pursuit of an intralingual proficiency objective'. Chellappan (1983, p.60) in his article expresses similar sentiments 'Our aim should not be to eliminate translation—or to equate second language learning with translation, but to absorb translation in a larger creative process of learning'. Duff (1989, p.6-7) lists five reasons why he believes 'it deserves its place—along with other approaches'.

- It helps us to better understand and contrast the influence of L1 on L2.
- It is a natural activity, which goes on all the time unlike some artificial made up classroom activities.

- It is necessary and learners need to be able to move between L2 and L1.
- It is authentic and covers the complete range of skills, styles and registers.
- It is useful. It involves speculation and discussion whilst developing three essential language learning qualities—accuracy, quality and flexibility. Furthermore selective materials can be used to illustrate particular aspects of the target language.

Both theoretical considerations and practical observations support this view that translation is a useful and beneficial activity in language learning.

The role of L1 in learning L2 is a central question pertaining to this usefulness of translation in language learning. Ellis charts the differing views on this question (Ellis 1994, p.28-30). Initially the behaviourist framework saw the issue as one of negative transfer or interference where L1 differed from L2 and positive transfer where they were similar. However these predictions did not always turn out as expected so a minimalist position was adopted with the prevailing theory being that intralingual factors were more important. Finally the pendulum swung back and as Ellis (1994, p.29) says 'More recently the importance of transfer has once again been acknowledged.....Evidence for transfer in all aspects of language—phonology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics is now abundant.....also in avoidance, overuse and facilitation.....transfer works in complex ways and it constitutes one of several processes involved in L2 acquisition'. With the acknowledgement of the influence of L1 on L2 learning, the way is also open to include translation in language teaching methodology.

Another factor influencing the use of translation in language teaching concerns the various theories of second language acquisition

because from these theories the use of translation can be recommended, proscribed or ignored according to whether they support intralingual theories or crosslingual ones. In the late seventies and early eighties Krashen formulated his five hypothesis on language acquisition. He distinguishes between acquisition of language—the communicative use of language forming the Acquired system, and the learning of language—the conscious knowing of the language forming the Learnt system. In his opinion acquisition only comes from comprehension and learning, which includes translation, contributes to a monitor which only effects and checks the learnt system. In his paper on translation Das (1983, p.275-278) puts forward arguments that translation can facilitate transfer to the Acquired system. ‘The fact is that the production of any utterance in the target language, for many learner users, remains for a very long time a process of translation with monitoring.’ He then goes on to explain how and why translation can be a useful activity in the classroom because, unlike most classroom activities where ‘there is usually a polarisation of attention to meaning and form’, translation is one of the few activities which enable a learner ‘to focus on both simultaneously, to a more or less equal extent’. During translation the learner while primarily considering meanings must also deal with form to express these meanings. He concludes (1983. p.279) ‘If we think of second language acquisition as essentially the process of matching new forms (in the target language) to meanings which have been learnt, then translations represent the paradigm very neatly. The preoccupation with meaning is essential for the Acquired system but the needs of the Learnt system are not ignored’.

Another theoretical concept that involves consideration in regard to the use of translation in language learning is Selinker’s concept of Interlanguage. This assumes ‘a learner of a second language goes through a psycholinguistic stage of learning before he or she can gain the competence of a native speaker’ (Vongvipanond 1983). Stern

(1992, p.77) writing about the interlanguage and the effect of L1 says 'to a certain extent the learner develops his own interlanguage on the basis of his L1, and that in certain ways L1 and L2 fuse'. Two hypotheses exist for the development of this interlanguage and opinion is divided on which is correct. The independent theory of the Creative Construction hypothesis supports an intralingual interpretation whilst the gradual progression theories of the Restructuring hypothesis support a crosslingual interpretation. My own experiences as both a language teacher and as a second, as well as third language learner lead me to believe, whichever may be correct, translation plays an undeniable part in the development of a learner's interlanguage. Although I am almost fluent in my second language, with an interlanguage closely approaching the target language, on occasions when faced with a word outside of my interlanguage, with a meaning I cannot negotiate. I immediately turn to translation as the method to understand it. Likewise in the case of my third language, where I have less competence and a more basic interlanguage, when faced with a new word or grammatical form I again immediately turn to translation to negotiate understanding. As an advanced learner or an elementary one, translation plays an important part in establishing meaning and building an interlanguage that leads to fluency in L2. Stanfield in his paper on translation (1978, p.3) says 'most students will in the course of their language structuring make approximations and even translations in their minds....search for correspondence between the two languages is natural and normal for an adult'.

Uses

One important use of translation in language teaching is in the presentation of new lexical items. Much has been made of the dangers of translation and the lack of one to one correspondence between words, however at times it can be a quick and efficient method of presenting new vocabulary. All teachers have come across the situation

where almost everyone in the class has reached understanding except for one and despite all efforts the teacher just cannot get the message through. Meanwhile, while this effort is made to mime and explain for one student, the rest of the class is getting bored and the flow of the lesson has been interrupted. Translation by the teacher or classmate can quickly put an end to this situation, as Harmer (1983, p.86) writes 'It seems silly not to translate if by doing so a lot of time can be saved'. Wilkins (1972, p.221) sees translation as useful on 'some occasions when it is more desirable to obtain a rapid and easy interpretation than to enter on a more lengthy technique'. These occasions could be when the teacher does not want to interrupt a highly motivating activity or 'where the teacher is more concerned with the general meaning of a text than with the individual items it contains' (1972, P.130).

Urgese in his article (1989, p.39) presents an alternate side to the question of using translation in the presentation of new lexical items commenting on how intralingual methods are not always successful in conveying the contextualised meaning to all learners. The general passiveness of the Asian students I teach, brought up in an educational and social atmosphere where they do not ask questions or wish to stand out, means that sometimes they do not fully understand the meaning of all vocabulary or of an activity going on at a certain time but do not make me aware of this. Usually I discover their lack of understanding and hopefully as they progress and become familiar with the class such occasions diminish, but there must still be some occasions when I do not pick it up. Stern (1992, p.78-79) reports on the results of French L2 learners taught exclusively in French in England which pointed to greater oral fluency of those who did not use translation yet at the same time student dissatisfaction with a lack of understanding of the teacher due to a lack of translation and clearly established meaning in their classroom. This points to the possibility that exclusive reliance on intralingual methods is

not always successful in achieving clear comprehensible input that leads to 'internalised L2 competence'. He goes on 'Explanations and definitions in L2 do not necessarily lead to comprehension.....but they are open to misinterpretation.' (1992, p.80). Translation therefore has a place in supplementing intralingual practices on presenting new lexical items to ensure comprehensible input and to avoid such misinterpretation.

Also connected to the subject of translation and vocabulary is the dictionary. Koren, in her article comparing modern dictionaries (1997), lists four types; the monolingual, the bilingual, the electronic and the bilingualized (or mono-bilingual) dictionary. She advocates the latter as it has the advantages of both the monolingual, which teachers prefer, and the bilingual, which on the other hand students generally prefer. She quotes a study by Laufer and Melamed in 1994 that showed the bilingualized dictionary as the most suitable for language learners. Using a monolingual learner and a bilingual dictionary together would also be advantageous but is cumbersome. She dismisses the electronic dictionary, although popular with students, because at this stage it offers only limited translation facilities. However this may change as technology advances and they gain the full range of computer abilities. Consequently with dictionaries as with teachers introducing new lexical items a combination of intralingual and cross lingual methods seems most successful.

Testing has an important part in language learning and translation is one useful method of conducting it both formally, in progress tests, and informally, in ongoing assessment. As already mentioned, translation can facilitate meaning of new lexical items. It can also be used to check or test whether meaning conveyed through other methods has been correctly understood. 'It is quick and easy test to administer and can conveniently be planned into a sequence of test techniques' (Underhill 1987, p.79). In general translation from L2 to

L1 is the preferred method for these purposes. Stanfield calls this process 'retranslation, an efficient device for checking quickly and accurately whether students have grasped or remember a vocabulary item' (1978, p.35). Writing about translation from oral L2 to L1 Urgese (1989, p.39) says 'a written translation of an oral text is a good way of verifying comprehension because it shows with certainty what the pupils have understood—it measures only listening and not a different skill.' L2 comprehension tests would be dependent on the learner's writing skills or reading skills as well as listening comprehension skills. Also, as Deeney (1983, p.283) writes in his article concerning written exercises, 'translation has one obvious advantage over a regular exercise. In the latter clever and perhaps lazy students, can get across most ideas with a very limited vocabulary and sentence structure'. Urgese (1989, P.39) goes further when talking about translating from written L2 to L1 claiming that 'too many written exercises can be done without the pupils understanding them. Clever pupils can answer questions and complete sentences without understanding their meaning'. Regarding reading comprehension he goes on to say 'often when pupils believe they understand, they have only invented meaning using the words they know ignoring what they do not know'. To avoid these problems of avoidance and misunderstanding, translation as a part of the testing process can provide a clearer and more accurate picture of the language learner's development.

A further use of translation in language learning is in contrastive and error analysis. As already discussed the influence of L1 on L2 acquisition, according to Ellis (1994, p.29), is recognised as complex and one of many variables involved in the process. Urgese (1989, p.39) believes the use of translation in contrastive analysis is beneficial for language learners in comparing new grammar rules between L1 and L2, not only helping them to understand the differences and similarities but also in retaining these rules so that they can use it

when they formulate a new sentence in L2. Brown (1980, p.226) suggests that information obtained from error analysis of translation exercises can provide a wealth of data, which can be used in language teaching by teachers to prevent and remediate errors in L2. Stern (1992, p.84) lists a variety of class activities that use translation for contrastive analysis. Duff (1989) has written a whole book of translation activities many of which are also centred around this practice. Some grammatical aspects his translation activities are concerned with include context, register, word order, reference, tense, mood and aspect.

However his translation activities are not only limited to contrasting grammatical aspects of language learning, they also deal with the whole nature of language and it associated culture. This importance of culture in language learning and translation as a tool for widening cultural understanding in order to increase L2 proficiency is accepted and promoted by many writers. Stanfield (1978, p.16) in his paper about translation describes the differences in languages as 'speakers of a different language not only say things differently but say different things!' He goes on to describe how even though the Whorfian hypothesis 'that speakers of different languages have quite different thought processes' is seen as exaggerated, it is true 'that many words, idioms, proverbs and other elements of a language are culturally determined and thus not easily encodable into a language with a different cultural background'. Kramersch (1993) in her book largely concerning the influence and importance of culture on language learning, writes how teaching a language is more than just communication skills, comprehensible input, grammar and vocabulary but also context, style, genre and register. She, like Duff, suggests a number of translation-based activities with examples, generally for higher-level students, designed to bridge cultural gaps in order to promote better L2 proficiency (1993, pp.148-170).

Other writers also subscribe to the benefits of using translation to expand cultural understanding. Deeney (1983, p.287) in his paper about translation comments on the importance of cultural understanding in L2 proficiency and talks about 'cultranslation' where translation is an aid in learning about culture and a comparative or contrastive approach 'is intended to surface otherwise unnoticed similarities and differences between culture'. Parks (1982, p.244) in his paper writes how translation is ideally suited 'to realise the linguistic and cultural differences between languages (and cultures)'. Translation he says can teach valuable insights into both the culture and concepts of the target language.

My experiences as both a language learner and language teacher lead me to agree with the importance of culture in language teaching, and translation as an important method for enhancing this cultural understanding. In my experience living in the country of my second language for four years, and the country of my third language for almost ten years, as well as linguistic knowledge, I have picked up considerable cultural knowledge. When back in the country of my first language, I am constantly aware that different cultures are intrinsically bound to their respective languages by the vast differences I experience. In explaining and understanding the differences I experience, 'translation' as Duff (1989, p.124) calls it 'is the key to crossing the border from one to another'.

Conclusion

Translation is a natural and common activity used by all language learners. Recognition of translation as a useful activity in language teaching has again gained favour, although many teachers remain averse to its use. The preference for the use of intralingual strategies in language teaching does not exclude the use of crosslingual strategies such as translation, which on many occasions can be advantageous in increasing the linguistic abilities and

competencies of a L2 learner. In fact the use of intralingual strategies supplemented by crosslingual strategies may be the most useful strategy for language teaching . Translation is beneficial in studying vocabulary, in testing and in contrastive analysis but perhaps its greatest benefits lie in expanding cultural knowledge thereby improving competency in the corresponding language. In his keynote address at an English Australia conference Duff spoke about the great importance of translation in the world today despite its lack of support in language teaching. Through some humorous examples of over and under translation he demonstrated the connection between language, culture and translation. He concluded with a plea to the language teachers in the audience to consider the use of translation in their teaching, a plea I also endorse.

Appendix

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