



## Workshop on pedagogic translation as a skill-enhancing tool

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### **Abstract**

The use of translation as a language teaching technique has long been viewed with suspicion and at times condemned so strenuously without any really convincing reason. On the basis of recent language teaching technique research (Cook, Popovic, Ross, Yule, Harmer) and taking into consideration some findings resulting from the research carried out by the Italian contemporary school of linguistic scholars (Balboni, Mazzotta, Freddi, Salmon, Di Sabato), the present researcher proposes to organize a translation workshop in which most of the new theoretical stances about translation will be put into practice, actively involving participants in a series of translation-related activities. The main purpose of this workshop is to test the effectiveness of translation as a linguistic skill-enhancing tool, with the aim of confirming its value as an indispensable activity in any language learning process.

### **Introduction**

The use of translation as a language teaching technique has long been viewed with suspicion and at times condemned so strenuously without any really convincing reason. On the basis of recent language teaching techniques research, for example those carried out by Widdowson, Popovic, Harmer, Duff, Allen and Harvey, Nunan and Lamb, Bowen and Marks, among others, and taking into consideration some findings resulting from further research by the Italian contemporary school of linguistic scholars, such as Mazzotta, Freddi, Salmon, Balboni and Di Sabato, the present researcher proposes a translation methodology in which most of the new theoretical stances about translation are put into practice, actively involving participants in a series of translation-related activities. The main purpose of this paper is to suggest the effectiveness of translation as a linguistic skill-enhancing tool, with the aim of confirming its value as an indispensable activity in the language learning process.



## 1. Authoritative scholarly opinions on translation

I'd like to start this paper with a number of references dealing with authoritative scholarly opinions about translation in language learning. Already in 1979, Widdowson suggested that:

"The use of translation as a teaching technique has long been viewed with suspicion by language teachers and many proscribe it altogether as a matter of principle. I want to argue that translation, conceived in a certain way, can be a very useful pedagogic device" (Widdowson, 1979).

This statement was strengthened by Duff, who affirmed that:

"As a language learning activity, translation has many merits. It invites speculation and discussion, develops clarity, flexibility and accuracy. The teacher can select material to illustrate particular aspects of language and structure with which the students have difficulty" (Duff, 1989).

Along the same line of thought, we find other concepts, such as the following:

"Where the teacher is teaching a monolingual class, translation is obviously an excellent technique if the teacher is fluent in the students' language. The main advantages are that it is quick and efficient" (Harmer, 1991).

In the same period, Hosenfeld stated that:

"The perennial dispute about whether foreign language students do or do not translate is anachronistic. Many do translate". (Hosenfeld, in Allen and Harvey, 1992).

Of particular interest were the results of a survey about French classes in Great Britain, where the teacher used only the foreign language. The students expressed the following opinions:

"French is hard because the teacher does not tell us in English what the word in French means, but does it by action and we don't always understand them. If the word means "jump" and we don't know, she jumps. In some cases it is not an action word. So we speak words in French that we don't understand"  
"I can't understand the teacher. She never tells us what she's on about"  
"Our teacher explains in French and when he has finished, I still don't understand a word"  
"The teacher blurts out a lot of French words I haven't read before and expects me to understand them"  
"I would like, after the teacher has said something, that she repeats it in English. We would be able to understand better, I'm sure". (Burstall et al., in Allen and Harvey, 1992).



## 2. Outcome of further research on the subject

Initially spurred by these ideas, I kept on researching on the subject, and among my findings I'd like to quote a series of selected opinions on the same topic, belonging to more recent researchers, such as Bowen and Marks, who affirmed that:

"Someone, somewhere, suggested that translation was somehow a bad thing, to be avoided at all costs. But most English teachers around the world share the same mother tongue as their learners. Avoiding translation at all costs is absurd. It is a useful tool when it is appropriate and constructive to use it. Some learners operate particularly effectively by relating lexical items to their L1 equivalents. Prohibit this bilingual approach could have extremely negative effects on the motivation of such learners" (Bowen and Marks, 1994).

Echoing the same concepts, Nunan and Lamb stated that:

"Problems arise when teachers try to avoid using the first language in class. The explanation is clumsy, consumes valuable time and, judging by the students' attempts to use it, not understood. A quick translation would have short-circuited the rather tortuous process" (Nunan and Lamb, 1996).

More voices supporting the use of translation in class were to be heard after the turn of the century, including Ross, affirming that:

"Translation is useful in the EFL classroom in order to compare grammar, vocabulary, word order and other language points in English and the students' mother tongue" (Ross, 2000).

Popovic, in a paper written in 2001, reaffirmed that:

"The search for the super-method as the ultimate solution of language teaching problems may be in vain, and a different track should be pursued instead. Attention ought to be shifted on the identification of alternative techniques. Translation is a legitimate pedagogic tool especially in an EFL environment, and deserves to be rehabilitated. Translation is a real-life communicative activity. The learners translate in class for peers, decode signs in the environment, translate notes and letters, and so on. Moreover, with the increased mobility of persons and goods, translation is expected to be practiced almost on a daily basis. Language competence is a two-way system, and we should be able to communicate into and from the same system" (Popovic, 2001)

In the same year, Cook expressed his opinions on translation saying that:

"It is perhaps time the profession took another look at translation practice. It is to be hoped that this prediction will be realized in a renaissance of translation in language teaching" and that : "Real-world foreign language use is full of translation, and for the majority of the world population, switching and negotiating between languages is part and parcel of everyday use" (Cook, 2004).



More recently, another group of scholars, mainly from Italy, showed interest in translation as a skill-enhancing tool, for instance Balboni (1998) states that translation can contribute to textual, interlinguistic and intercultural reflections.

Freddi (1999) stresses the importance of translation within the language learning process as a fifth skill, and Mazzotta (2002) affirms that through translation students can be the real promoters of their learning process by checking their linguistic command autonomously; or Salmon (2005) who stresses the fact that in translation, error spotting and correction can be used as positive hints to reinforce specific linguistic points, e.g. connectors and sentence structures.

Di Sabato (2007) taking into consideration corpus analysis, and the relation between language teaching and translation practice, affirms that dividing sentences in chunks and comparing them between two different languages can contribute to a more complete understanding about how a language works, once again stressing the value of translation as a process, rather than as a product.

### **3. Workshop begins**

Taking into account these opinions, expressed by different scholars through a considerable number of years, I started to organize my translation classes at the University of Quintana Roo trying to integrate these theoretical bases into an effective language teaching methodology, where translation has pride of place as a linguistic skill-developing process, not necessarily as a product.

The methodology consists of a step-by-step procedure, involving students at all stages: in my classes, it has been appreciated by pupils, who felt motivated and willing to take an active role in the process.

#### **3.1 Workshop steps**

- The teacher selects a text, taking into account the level of the students' linguistic competence, vocabulary knowledge and general culture;
- The students skim through the text, with the aim of identifying the type of text, the style, the register, the source, and the readership;



- The students read the text aloud, in turns, in order to get acquainted with the topic and understand the general message and meaning. At this stage, the teacher can check the students' pronunciation and reading skills;
- Students read the text individually and silently, underlining unknown terms and thinking about possible translation difficulties; this activity can be carried out preferably in groups or pairs, to give them the opportunity to share viewpoints, discuss problems and translation strategies and compare possible solutions;
- Students do a preliminary translation, using monolingual and bilingual dictionaries, synonyms and antonyms lists, and, if needed, other information sources, especially if they are not really familiar with the topic (encyclopedias, web pages, specialized books, translation software, experts);
- In groups, they can compare their versions and come up with one translation per group, or with one translation for each student, in case they don't reach an agreement about how to translate one or different segments;
- Each student in the group or one student per group reads out his translated versions: the other students are supposed to listen attentively, and are allowed to ask the reader to repeat a segment, in order to suggest other solutions, make comments and discuss their fellows' choices: in many cases, highly-enriching debates take place at this stage;
- If students are already familiar with translation techniques, they can discuss their use in the translation, with special attention to the line of thought they followed before choosing what in their opinion is the appropriate translation of a segment; this has something in common with the "Think Aloud Protocols"
- Each group draws up a final version of the translation, which the teacher collects and evaluates according the objectives of the course.



### **3.2 Final reflections about the linguistic skills practiced in the process**

If we think about the different skills which students have to use within the framework of this methodology, we realize that all of them are of paramount importance in the language learning process:

- Pronunciation and reading skills; text skimming and scanning;
- Text analysis: they reflect on word use and new vocabulary, examine syntax, collocations, idioms and communicative effectiveness; mental translation skills enter into play;
- Group work capabilities, communication among them, listen to other students' opinions, learn to carry out a balanced discussion;
- Research with multiple sources, use of translation software, surf the Net, how to use a monolingual and a bilingual dictionary, contact experts;
- Comparative analysis between the source and the target text, reflection on differences and similarities between the two languages;
- Logical reasoning, justify their choices and defend them against possible criticism;
- Writing in their own native language or, even more enriching, writing in the target language, thereby practicing the active use of a language in its written form; linguistic creativity;
- Their discussion are supposed to be carried out in the target language, so that the speaking skill is also practiced; public speech skill development;
- Final presentation of the work: form, style, punctuation, format, elegance in editing.
- Cultural enrichment through the attention they pay to the textual content, which should be relevant for their personal information and cultural environment, also because they usually don't read so much.

### **4. Further considerations about translation**

Some of the results obtained through the use of this skill-enhancing, translation-based language teaching methodology can be summarized as follows:

- Translation contributes to immediate understanding



- Translation is one of the most frequently used linguistic skills
- There are positive transfers between two idioms
- Knowing how two languages work is useful for data memorization, since inputs are doubled
- Pronunciation improves if we know the meaning of a term in our native language
- Tension is reduced through the use of the native language
- The different steps in the translation process, leading to a written production, improve linguistic command
- Translation is an activity focused on the student
- Translation implies a cross-cultural understanding
- Translation is a creative activity, through which students can develop and check their own linguistic competence

Taking all this into consideration, it is possible to affirm that translation practice, carefully used in different moments of the language learning process, and especially with intermediate and advanced students, can contribute to the students' general culture, linguistic competence advancement, creative and cognitive skills, while widening the range of their possible future job opportunities.

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## Appendix

### TRANSLATION SEEN FROM A CULTURAL AND POLITICAL SLANT

COOK, 2002

“The outlawing of translation not only reflects the monolingual mind-set of the English-speaking world, it has also been to its political and economic advantage. Monolingual native-speakers have been privileged and the status of local experts undermined”

CRONIN, 2003

“The monoglot megastate is an inflexible, non-adaptive system, and the resistance to that influence will be expressed in the language of a specific place and culture”

CRONIN, 2003

“Translation is all about making connections, linking one culture and language to another, setting up conditions for an open-ended exchange of goods, technologies and ideas... and it is because they connect more and more places and people to the cultural network that translators are important. Our cultural health and survival relies as much on our mutual connectedness as our physical well-being relies on safeguarding the planet together”



JONES, 1998

“There is a social pleasure in translating and interpreting, and it is that of establishing communication. Communication among people is one of the greatest riches humankind has”

BOKOR 2001

“There is probably no activity that is as international as translation. Our mission as translators is to bridge the gap between different languages and cultures, and to promote international understanding.... I am proud of belonging to a trade which is inherently pacifist and concerns itself with promoting good international understanding”

**Biodata**

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