"DO MENTION IT!" THE (HUSHED-UP) USE OF TRANSLATION IN THE TRANSFER OF KNOWLEDGE AND TERMINOLOGY FROM L1 INTO L2

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Abstract: The evolution of the use of translation in foreign language teaching in the Romanian education system follows the average European 'rise and fall' trend. At least at the level of educational policies, after the regime change in 1989, EFL teaching in Romanian schools shifted away from the audio-lingual method garnished with grammar-translation strategies that had been in use for many years. Nevertheless, though practitioners have been loath to admit it openly, translation has never been completely abolished from classes, for reasons including the conservative attitudes of older teachers and the persistence of translation tasks in certain national or entrance tests. This paper looks at an area in which translation can be recognized as a useful teaching tool in the transfer of knowledge and terminology from L1 into L2.

Keywords: 'English only' policy, pedagogical translation, L1 use, EFL methods, bilingual techniques

Introduction

Research interest in the use of translation in foreign language teaching and learning has grown in recent years (Roberts Auerbach 1993; Schweers 1999; Cook 2001; Lindsay &Knight 2006; Brooks-Lewis 2009, Siefert 2013, etc.), as more and more professionals have started to question the 'rule' that completely bans in-class translation and L1 use. Such an interdiction can be explained by the connection automatically made in people's minds between translation tasks and the Grammar Translation Method. The latter, as Siefert puts it, "often […] is not even named explicitly when the topic of translation is handled, but L2 instruction and SLA, with words such as "traditional," "old-fashioned," or "historic," still manage to make references to the GTM in coded form during their discussions of translation. (Siefert 2013: 5-6)

Research in this direction has already started to trigger a reconsideration of the 'English only' policy in the FL class. In this view, it has been acknowledged that the teacher should stop pretending that students have no mother tongue. Since in the contemporary philosophy of education learners are encouraged to construct their hypotheses based upon their prior experiences and try them out in the real world, effective teaching presupposes the understanding of the mental models that students use to perceive the world and this cannot exclude their native language.

As an individual with experience in both systems (I studied English before and shortly after 1990 and have been teaching it since the mid 90's) I have never lost contact with the theory and practice of interlingual rendition, inside either practical translation or theoretical language classes at university level. However, a clarification of the etymology and meanings of the polysemous term *translation* is essential, and a line should be drawn between teaching translation from or into the L1, using translation techniques in the process of teaching a

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foreign language and making use of the L1 to give instructions or explanations during the FL class. Leonardi's observations below serve to distinguish between the first two categories:

> Confusion tends to be made, at times, between *pedagogical translation* and *translation pedagogy*. Whereas the former refers to translation as a valid teaching tool in foreign language learning the latter refers to the teaching of translation to train professionals. (Leonardi 2010: 81)

In my view, pedagogical translation (Leonardi labels it as 'the fifth skill in SLA') - which employs various pre-, while- and post-translation activities - encompasses the use of the L1 which can be seen as a subtype circumscribed in it.

As regards the meaning and etymology of *translation*, I have selected three definitions only from the enormous number of interpretations proposed especially by translation studies theoreticians, as this study is not concerned with the pedagogy of translation. Thus, the *Etymonline Dictionary* points to the direct relation between the noun of action *translation* (from Latin *translationem*) and the past participle stem of *transferre* (www.etymonline.com). In *Dictionary Reference*, the Latin *trānslātus* (past participle of *trānsferre* = to transfer), is equated to *trāns- trans-*+ *-lātus* (suppletive past participle of *ferre* = to bear) (http://dictionary.reference.com).

Scriban's *Dictionary* explains **translaţiúne/-áţie* in Romanian: (lat. *translátio*, *-ónis*, d. *trans*, dincolo, şi *latio*, ducere.) as "Transferare. Traducere. Mişcarea unuĭ solid fără a-şĭ schimba poziţiunea (fără rotaţiune)" (http://dexonline.ro).

The definitions above will be used further on to explain my current attitudes towards the use of translation and L1 in teaching and learning.

Overview of EFL methods used in the Romanian education system

The evolution of the use of the L1 and translation in foreign language teaching in the Romanian education system follows the average European 'rise and fall' trend. Thus, through the middle of the 20th century, teaching practices moved from the Grammar-Translation Method (first employed in schools in late 18th century especially for the study of classical languages) and the Direct/Natural Method (established in Germany and France at the beginning of the 20th century and focusing on spoken language) towards a mixture of techniques and strategies belonging to the Audio-Lingual/Army Approach (early 1950's, focusing on drilling and error correction) and the Natural Approach (late 1970's - early 1980's, intended to build communicative skills with little or no conscious learning).

In the Romanian textbooks before 1990, translation tasks (into and from English) co-existed with comprehension questions, vocabulary exercises, grammar drills and writing assignments. The L1 was still present in such school materials, as their target group was chiefly a monolingual class, where all the learners shared Romanian as their first language.

At least in the case of English, the communicative language teaching (CLT) rapidly gained terrain soon after the political regime change in 1990, and, particularly thanks to the British Council policy and experts, the whole landscape of EFL teaching professedly did away with the previous strategies that had been in use for many years. Nevertheless, even

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against school policies and course materials[1], in practice translation and L1 use have never been completely abolished from classes, for reasons including the conservative attitudes of older teachers or schools and the persistence of translation tasks in certain national or entrance tests, though professionals have been loath to admit it.

Unlike the actual practice in schools, at university level both lecture and seminar-type classes were conducted only in the target language before 1990. This monolingual behavior was possible mostly because all students were bilinguals with strong initial literacy due to the fact that they were selected after a very difficult entrance exam. After 1990, the shift towards mass education resulted in lower linguistic competence levels of students and this produced significant changes in the teaching strategies in universities.

Brooks-Lewis enumerates the progression of the attitudes towards the L1 use in association with FL teaching methods and approaches. Beginning with the Direct Method, continuing with the Natural and Audio-Lingual Approaches to CLT, the majority of theoreticians and practitioners recommend limited use of mother tongue intended to fend away interference, or even exclusion of the L1 (Brooks-Lewis 2009: 218-9).

The overview above makes it clear that officially in Romanian schools there is no or, at best, little room for translation and L1 use in FL teaching and learning.

Description of activity

The activity described here – the course in English morpho-syntax – is based on the course book *Morpho-syntax – An introduction with special focus on the Romanian student of English*, Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza" Iaşi, 2013 and is carried out in the first semester (October to January), with the English minor students of the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi. Each course meets once per week for two lecture hours and one seminar hour throughout a 14-week semester. Class attendance is obligatory and the size of the groups varies between 100 and 150 students.

This course provides a general introduction to Morphology (the structure of words) and Syntax (the structure of phrases and sentences). Its main objective is to provide a foundation for understanding and analyzing English grammar; it is built on the prior knowledge the students have acquired about the grammar of Romanian and English during secondary school, as well as about General Linguistics, English Lexicology and English Phonetics and Phonology during their 1st year at the university.

Consequently, because this course deals with the English language, it uses English examples to illustrate the theoretical points (many of them selected from literature or newspapers, for the sake of authenticity), but instances from and analogies with the Romanian grammar are discussed as often as this can throw light on the more difficult issues. This choice is backed up, on the one hand, by the results of the actual experience I have had with teaching Morpho-syntax to Romanian students of English for more than five years, and, on the other, by an additional argument in Huddleston and Pullum's Preface to *A Student's Introduction to English Grammar*, an argument I find very useful for the present discussion:

[1] The series *Pathway to English* (*English My Love, Perspectives on English* and *English News & Views*) is realized by a team of Romanian teachers of English advised by British specialists. Its target is the Romanian learner of English, so that besides the coverage of all four language skills, it includes a systematic development of translation skills. In this respect, it is an exception among the textbooks used in Romanian schools.

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> Knowing the grammar of your native language is an enormous help for anyone embarking on the study of another language, even if it has rather different grammatical principles; the contrasts as well as the parallels aid understanding (Huddleston & Pullum 2007: viii).

Participants' reading and responsibilities

Students are expected to study the sections assigned for each session in advance, according to a schedule they receive at the beginning of the semester. Each week they should spend at least two hours and a half on reading for this course. On average, they will spend approximately 90 minutes on reading the material, and 60 minutes on the exercises. However, the two activities cannot be separated and should be done sequentially, because the practice exercises and questions are designed to sustain their progress and to help them reflect on the issues covered in the course.

Students are encouraged to spend time at home writing down the questions or comments they might have concerning the assignments and the answers they get to them during class discussions. The questions usually become useful discussion topics for the seminars and this will contribute to their successfully meeting the specific objectives of the course. Apart from building up competence, the immediate result of these tasks is that their own written notes and summaries will build their portfolio. They are advised to keep all such material, as much of it will be useful in the exam sessions.

Responsibilities are always discussed with the students during the first class. They are invited to ask questions, express their opinions, and propose amendments to the outline I propose. After a five years' experience, I should say that this preliminary discussion is crucial for the success of the activity, since teachers and students have to share the responsibility of decision-making and agree upon a number of things. According to Kohonen, "as the teacher's and pupil's roles are complementary, it is not possible for one of the partners to make a unilateral declaration of independence as to his a her role; the new roles need to be negotiated and agreed upon (Kohonen 2006: 5).

Discussion

The main pedagogical reason behind using translation in L2 teaching is my conviction that, since novice teachers will mimic their teachers' styles (according to the saying "you will teach the way you were taught") and because most of my students prepare to become English teachers, they should be offered the tools that can capacitate them to provide clear explanations, assess justly and make proper corrections.

In the same line of thought, Kolln and Funk's observations below point to some advantages every student has at his/her disposal.

> When you study the grammar of your native language, then, you are studying a subject you already "know"; so rather than learning grammar, you will be "learning about" grammar. If you're not a native speaker, you will probably be learning both grammar and "about" grammar; the mix will depend on your background and experience. It's important that you understand what you are bringing to this course — even though you may have forgotten all chose "parts of

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> speech" labels and definitions you once consciously learned. The unconscious, or subconscious, knowledge that you have can help you if you will let it. (Kolln and Funk 2012, 15)

When I teach Morpho-syntax, I find it important to start from the things students already know from prior L1 instruction (such as, for example, common Romanian grammatical terminology) and use such knowledge to build analogies and draw correspondences with the new information introduced about the L2 language structures. By seeing forms and functions in both languages side by side in a table (which is, in fact, a form of translation) the similarities and the differences between them become more obvious. Such awareness can be very useful in the process of grammatical analysis and, besides, a useful revision and reinforcement of the theoretical knowledge about the L1 is also achieved.

I invite students to look at a number of anticipated difficulties, i.e. the declarative positive → declarative negative/interrogative positive/interrogative positive/ interrogative negative sentence transformation. Romanian learners often encounter difficulties when using the English operator because there is no such mechanism in their native language. This process requires knowledge about the operator and its functions, and the Romanian speaker of English needs to be familiar with the English patterns - where the operator and subject change places - unlike in Romanian – where interrogatives have a simpler structure. A table with the English examples translated into Romanian is truly effective and memorable.

Such bilingual tables can prove useful in another problem area, that of false cognates. It can easily be inferred that one should be cautious with grammatical knowledge transfer from one language into another even with seemingly similar terms. Thus, the members of the pairs *phrase – frază, complement – complement* can be rated as false friends, while the correspondences *subject - subiect, predicate - predicat, verbal– verb* are only partial because inside a pair they share some features but not all of them. A listing of the English word classes contrasted with the Romanian părţi de vorbire, or of the clause functions vs. părţile de propoziţie, with suitable definitions and examples exploits students' previous knowledge on which the new one is successfully built.

In this way, students assemble a bilingual inventory of terms designating word classes, groups and clause elements that articulate the old and the newly acquired material, and which becomes a useful resource when they need to explain grammar to their own students.

In following the contrastive approach, I propose analogous constructions in the L1 and L2 (such as the Passive Voice, whose broad structure is, both in Romanian and in English, *be + participle*) and I dwell upon the similarities and differences between them. Equally valuable are the partial analogies; thus, even if the grammatical category of aspect is said to be 'absent' in Romanian, the contrast between *Simple Past* and *Past Progressive* can successfully be demonstrated by using the relationship between two Romanian (past) tenses, namely *perfectul compus* and *imperfectul*. Students are asked to describe the actions of the verbals in the sentences *Ieri la ora 3 citeam o poezie* and *Ieri la ora 3 am citit o poezie*, then to translate them into English. The subsequent discussion highlights the function of aspect and leads to a better understanding of this verbal category in English.

There are certain L1-specific errors mostly generated by interference (such as the use of the present simple instead of the present perfect in examples like *Îl cunosc de când era*

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copil translated ~~*I know him since he was a child*~~) and students should be trained to recognize and anticipate them in order to be able to make pertinent corrections. In Leonardi's view, "one of the benefits of using translation activities in the FL classes is the control of L1 interference over L2 acquisition. […] [T]hrough the application of CA interference can be controlled in such a way that negative transfer can be reduced whereas positive transfer can be increased" (Leonard 2010: 81).

The late ban on translation goes hand in hand with the abolishment of the L1 use from the English class, but observation and reflection over the years, as well as student feed-back, have led me to conclude that learners manifest increased self confidence if they know they can always rely on analogies built through the targeted translation of particular structure types both when they teach and when they asses language in use. In more the same way, they regard grammar knowledge as a strong point that boosts their language competence.

Conclusions

The overall goal of my approach to pedagogical translation is to help Romanian students and teachers of English build confidence in approaching and analyzing the L2 sentences, clauses, phrases and words by simultaneously exploiting their knowledge of the L1.

Brooks-Lewis mentions the current recognition in literature of the L1 relevance in foreign language teaching in the humanistic approaches (the New Current Method, Community Language Learning, and Dodson's Bilingual Method) and the superiority of bilingual techniques to their monolingual counterparts (Brooks-Lewis 2009: 220). Based on my teaching experience I have reached the same conclusions, on the empirical pathway.

If the activity that I describe here can indeed lower students' learning anxiety and ultimately enhance their self-efficacy, then the use of pedagogical translation may develop further into a requisite strategy which will reconsider the role of the L1 in FL teaching and learning.

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