THE ROLE OF TRANSLATION IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

Gisela Florentina CUMPENAŞU
University of Pitesti

Abstract: *This article deals with the issue of how translation might best be used as a teaching technique in language classes. It initially presents a short historical review of the issue. Presenting some major reasons for taking translation as a teaching technique, the paper offers some practical guidance for incorporating the technique in the classrooms and methods of using bilingual texts.*

Keywords: *translation, technique, bilingual texts*

A historical review

Using translation as a teaching technique has had many ups and downs, that is, in different periods it has been an accepted as a teaching device or regarded as a controversial subject depending on prevailing objectives and teaching preferences (Rivers and Temperely, 1978). For many years it was right at the heart of language teaching, and indeed it was one of the basic elements of language in the medieval universities and schools (Duff, 1990). However, for the past few decades, translation has been generally put aside, and used from time to time in our courses.

A brief glance at the history of teaching English as a foreign language would demonstrate these "ups" and "downs". Translation was important in teaching Greek and Latin in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. *Grammar Translation Method* was the only method for teaching these languages. The most important aspect of the grammar translation method was that the translation was frequently used in the process of learning. It was used both as a means of explaining new words, grammar forms and structures and as a means of mastering the foreign language. However, excessive application of translation led to complete failure of the Grammar Translation Method and the drastic decline of the role of translation in TEFL.

Later on, Berlitz (1887), the founder of the *Direct Method*, severely reacted against the Grammar Translation Method and totally rejected translation. This method assumed the direct contact with the foreign language in meaningful situations and this approach supposed a better language learning from the part of the students.Thus, the Direct Method had a new orientation different from that of the grammar-translation method by substituting language contact for grammar recitation and language use for translation.

A study undertaken in 1923 on the state of foreign language teaching concluded that no single method guarantees successful results (Richards and Rodgers, 1990). The study, published as the *Coleman Report*, advocated that a more reasonable goal for a foreign language course would be a reading knowledge of the foreign language achieved through the gradual introduction of words and grammatical structures in simple reading texts. Coleman (1929) offered a compromise in the application of translation. Translation of some of the reading passages and grammatical structures was permissible. The use of the mother tongue was not prohibited in language instruction. Once again, translation was able to establish itself as a technique. Coleman allowed translation for better comprehension and interpretation of the reading passages.

BDD-A5589 © 2007 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 05:32:42 UTC)

Like the Direct Method, the *Audio-Lingual Method* attempted to develop target language skills without any reference to the mother tongue. This method was considered to be a further development of the direct method line.. According to this approach, in the process of habit formation via stimulus and response, old habits tend to get in the way of the new ones. The theory predicted that negative transfer from the first to the second language would take place in the learning process. Thus, it was believed that the elimination of the mother tongue from the learning environment would facilitate second, or foreign, language learning. Another characteristic of the audio-lingual method, of great importance for teaching a foreign language, was the rejection of translation as the main instrument of instruction.Therefore, all the exercises were within the target language, and the use of the student's native language was entirely minimized.

However, the *Cognitive Approach*, as a reaction to the Audio-lingual Approach rediscovered valuable features in the previous methods and thus emphasized translation (Stern, 1991). In this way the role of the mind, mentalistic activities, conscious and meaningful learning were also emphasized. The natural outcome of this emphasis was the revival of translation as a means of making the learning more meaningful and contextual.

The *Communicative Approach* was initially hostile to the use of translation in the classroom, but later it adopted a flexible approach. The inclusion of translation activities in the Headway textbooks is the sign of such flexibility. Apart from these ongoing "ups-and-downs," there are some reasons and inherent benefits in using translation as a teaching tool.

The role of translation in teaching a foreign language

By translation, we mean the transmission of a thought expressed in one language by means of another language. Translation is the interpretation of the meaning of a text in one language (the "source text") and the production, in another language, of an equivalent text (the "target text," or "translation") that communicates the same message.

The role of translation in foreign language teaching was of great importance. It was used as a means of conveying the meaning of a word, a phraseological group, a grammatical form or a sentence pattern. Translation was then considered to be a means of teaching a foreign language. But practice demonstrated, however, that the constant use of translation did not ensure the necessary conditions for students' direct comprehension and that speaking and reading were more important. Translation did not provide the development of speech habits and skills. Cosequently, the teacher might use translation when explaining new material and checking his students' knowledge.

There were also several types of translation used in foreign language teaching. Taking into account the relationship between the mother tongue and the foreign language, there were three types of translation: translation from the foreign language into the mother tongue, translation from the mother tongue into the foreign language and retranslation (first students translated from the foreign language into the mother tongue and then, after a while, back into the foreign language). Then, if we considered translation from the point of view of its relation to the original, there were four types of translation: *word for word translation* (or literally translation) which drew a comparision between the elements of the target language and those of the mother tongue observing in this way, the difference between these languages.

Another type of translation was *adequate translation*, which transmitted the thought expressed in the foreign language by means of the corresponding equivalents

BDD-A5589 © 2007 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 05:32:42 UTC)

of the mother tongue, then free translation or free interpretation of the text in the mother tongue that was read or heard in the foreign language.

The *literary-artistic translation* assumed a translation, which required special skills and knowledge. Therefore, it could not be introduced in school syllabus requirements. This type of translation under its two forms: written and oral, was to be used with the aim of checking students'comprehension and their knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. Consequently, translation was considered a means of teaching of foreign language and its various types were also recommended.

Translation must take into account a number of constraints, including context, the rules of grammar of the two languages, their writing conventions, their idioms and the like.

Perhaps the most common misconception about translation is that there exists a simple "word-for-word" relation between any two languages, and that translation is therefore a straightforward and mechanical process. On the contrary, translation is always fraught with uncertainties and with the potential for inadvertent "spilling over" of idioms and usages from one language into the other.

To decode the meaning of a text, the translator must first identify its component "translation units," that is to say, the segments of the text to be treated as a cognitive unit. A translation unit may be a word, a phrase or even one or more sentences. Behind this seemingly simple procedure lies a complex cognitive operation. To decode the complete meaning of the source text, the translator must consciously and methodically interpret and analyze all its features. This process requires thorough knowledge of the grammar, semantics, syntax, idioms, and the like, of the source language, as well as the culture of its speakers.

Reasons for using translation as a teaching technique

Teaching English at higher education is quite different from teaching it at secondary school or highschool. Here we teach the specialised vocabulary in a certain domain and it is a complex task. Moreover, students generally come from previous educational levels with a lack of knowledge and with no desire of getting involved in the teaching –learning process. Therefore, they should be aware of the fact that English is essential nowadays , on the one hand and that at this level they are taught specialised English courses based on specialised texts, on the other hand. What the students think and feel about language learning is of great importance in language teaching and this should be taken into account in any course planning (Nunnan 1999). They need to be able to relate lexis and structures of target language into their equivalents in their mother tongue. Therefore, sound pedagogy should make use of this learning style.

Translation makes the students develop their reading comprehension ability. It is quite obvious that before one can translate any text, he or she should read the text carefully, trying to make sense of its features like sentence structures, context and register. In other words, there should be a kind of textual analysis, which is very important in reading comprehension (Chellapan 1982). Indeed the difference between translation and reading is the degree of attention paid by the reader or translator, that is, in translation attention weighs far more heavily than in mere reading.

Translation is a conscious process of learning. In the translation process there are two types of activities both of which require full engagement of the learner. The first activity is "understanding" the source text and the second is "formulating" it in the target language (Herry and Higgins, 1992). This latter characteristic is what distinguishes translation from reading.

BDD-A5589 © 2007 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 05:32:42 UTC)

Translation is a kind of communicative activity, which is practiced within a meaningful context (Duff 1990). It enhances interaction between the teacher and the students and among the students themselves due to the fact that rarely is there any absolute "right" rendering of the text.

Translation can be used as an evaluative technique in reading classes. As reading is totally unobservable, comprehension should be inferred from the other behavior; it is important to be able to accurately assess students comprehension of the text read. That is, among the other techniques like "doing," "transferring," "answering," "extending," and "modeling," we may ask students to translate part of the reading text into their native language to ensure if they have fully grasped the meaning. This can be done at the end of the reading lesson.

Practical guidelines

As we have already discussed, students usually use L1 as a resource, so as teachers we should try to find out ways of exploiting this resource rather than neglecting it. To this end, some practical guidelines are presented below:

-Extreme care should be taken in selecting texts to be translated by the students. -Naturally, dull, overlong and uncommunicative texts that are difficult to translate usually demotivate the students. So, it is much more practical to start with short communicative texts.

In practical teaching situations, the students who are to work on translation should be given prior guidance on practical procedures before being engaged in the translation itself. Initially they should be told that translation is not just taking the pen and starting the translation word by word or sentence by sentence. They should be briefly informed of translation procedures like "preparation," "analysis," "transfer," "initial draft," "rewording," "testing the translation," "polishing," and "final manuscript" (Larson 1987).

Grouping the students is of great importance in our classes. It offers a cooperative climate and promotes learners responsibilities (Brown 2001). So, to get the best translation, students can work in groups and participate in oral discussions. These activities surely will make the translation task interesting since the students are learning the language in an active way.

To use translation as an effective teaching tool, the difficulty of the texts should be taken into account. In the selection of the texts, we should not only pay attention to the degree of second-language (L2) proficiency, but also the degree of difficulty of the texts. Unfortunately, there is not any comprehensive view on determining the text difficulty; however, teachers can make a prediction of the relative difficulty of a given text. One practical way of handling this problem is the initial adaptation of authentic translation material. In this way, some lexical, semantic, syntactic and discourse elements, which are supposed to impede the students' comprehension, may be manipulated (Darian, 2001). The translation of technical texts refers more specifically to texts that contain a high amount of terminology, that is, words or expressions that are used (almost) only within a specific field, or that describe that field in a great deal of detail.

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 .What’s crucial to examine is the absorption

BDD-A5589 © 2007 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 05:32:42 UTC)

time, i.e., the time needed to actually learn vocabulary and structures for functional use. Our work focuses on using bilingual material to aid reading comprehension, especially in ESP classes. Students ranged in age from 18 to 5o. Types of material ranged from elementary material to material discussing newspaper or magazine article topics or scientific texts. In all cases, I find students are more confident and obtain a better understanding of said vocabulary as shown by their previous test results before and after the onset of English learning using a bilingual text approach.

In general, I find students achieved a general versus specific understanding. I emphasize 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 definition , 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 students 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 have shown there are real differences instudents' 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 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. Now, as Brown 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 overgeneralization. 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 in his article "Students'

BDD-A5589 © 2007 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 05:32:42 UTC)

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 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.

Conclusion

There are some good reasons for the purposeful inclusion of translation activity in our classrooms. First of all, as a communicative activity, it enhances interaction between teacher and students and among the students themselves. Second, being a conscious process of language learning, it fully engages the learners in the learning process. Third, translation helps students develop their reading comprehension abilities. Fourth, it can be used as an evaluative technique for checking students reading comprehension of a particular text. However, in order to obtain the above-mentioned benefits, we must consider some points. The students should be initially given prior guidance on the practical procedures of translation activity and encouraged to work in groups to get the best translation. The degree of students' L2 proficiency along with the degree of the text difficulty should also be considered.

Bibliography

Brown, H. Douglas, *Teaching by Principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy.* Second edition: NY. Longman,2001

Darian, S. , Adapting Materials for Language Teaching. FORUM. Vol. 39.NO: 2 June: p.2,2001

Nunnan, D. , *Second Language Teaching and Learning*. Boston: Heinle& Heinle Publishers, 1999.

Hervey, S. and Higgins, I. , *Thinking Translation: A course in translation method*. London: Rutledge, 1992

Stern, H. H. , *Fundamental Concepts of Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991

Duff, A. , *Translation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.,1990

Richards, J. C. and Rodgers, T. (1990) *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching: A description and analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990

Gautam, K., *English Language Teaching: A critical study of methods and procedures*. Harman Publishing House.,1988

Larson, M. L. , *Meaning -based Translation: A guide to cross language equivalence*. University press of America, 1984

Chllapan, K., Translanguage, Translation and Second Language Acquisition. In F. Eppert (Ed.), *Papers on translation: Aspects, Concepts, Implications* (pp. 57-63) SEMEO Regional Language Center.,1982

Rivers, W. M. and Temperly, M. S. , *A Practical Guide to the Teaching of English as a Second Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978

Coleman, A. ,*The Teaching of Modern Languages in the United States*. New YorkMacmillan,1929

BDD-A5589 © 2007 Universitatea din Pitești

Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 05:32:42 UTC)