

Translation in Foreign Language Teaching: A Brief Overview of Pros and Cons

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In this paper I examine why translation has become an outlaw in certain circles in foreign language teaching. A list of the most common objections to using translation in the classroom will be contrasted with possible counter-objections, on the basis of which I support the view that translation can be used in a meaningful way in the teaching of foreign languages. Quite obviously, this view leads to a number of further questions concerning when, how, in what circumstances, and for what purposes translation may be usefully employed. These questions, however, cannot be discussed within the limits of the present paper.

1 Pedagogical translation versus real translation

According to Klaudy (2003: 133), a discussion of translation pedagogy requires that a distinction be made between two types of translation, which she calls **pedagogical translation** and **real translation**. Pedagogical and real translation differ from each other on three counts: the function, the object, and the addressee of the translation.

As regards function, pedagogical translation is an instrumental kind of translation, in which the translated text serves as a tool of improving the language learner's foreign language proficiency. It is a means of consciousness-raising, practising, or testing language knowledge. Lesznyák (2003: 61) points out two additional functions of pedagogical translation: illumination and memorisation. In real translation, on the other hand, the translated text is not a tool but the very goal of the process.

The object of real translation is information about reality, contained in the source text, whereas in pedagogical translation it is information about the language learner's level of language proficiency.

There is also a difference concerning the addressee of the two kinds of translation. In real translation it is a target language reader wanting some information about reality, while in pedagogical translation the addressee is the language teacher or the examiner, wanting information about the learner's proficiency.

Somewhat confusingly, Klaudy adds that we can speak of real translation “only if the aim of translation is to develop translation skills” (Klaudy 2003: 133). This should probably be understood to mean that the kind of translation that is practised in translator training institutions would qualify as real translation. A few lines later, however, she notes that even within the framework of such programmes we cannot speak of real translation in the true sense, since the addressee of the translation is mostly the teacher, not a real-world target reader. It might be added that the function and object of the translation would also mark such translations as pedagogical rather than real, as this kind of translation serves as a tool for improving the trainee’s translation skills and it is meant to produce information about the trainee’s level of translation proficiency rather than about the world outside.

An essentially similar distinction is made by Gile (1995: 22) between school translation and professional translation. He defines school translation as the writing of texts “following lexical and syntactic choices induced by the source-language text”, as opposed to professional translation, which is aimed at a reader who is fundamentally interested in the contents of the text. In school translation the focus is on the language, while in professional translation it is on the content of language. Professional translation can thus be seen as a different level of translation, where linguistic problems, in a strict sense, are a mere side issue. Thus the teaching of translation for professional purposes is also qualitatively different from the use of translation in foreign language teaching.

It then follows that “translator training starts where foreign language teaching ends” (Klaudy 2003: 133). In secondary schools and even in the foreign language departments of higher institutions we can only speak of pedagogical translation in the narrow sense, while the teaching of real translation is the task of translator training programmes, which are designed for this purpose.

In fact, Klaudy is talking about two kinds of pedagogical translation. One serves as a tool of foreign language teaching, the other as a tool of translator training. The object of the first is information about foreign language proficiency, the object of the second is information about translational proficiency. To distinguish these two subtypes, I will use Gile’s term **school translation** for the first type and will call the second type **simulated translation**. In this paper I will only be concerned with school translation.

Schäffner (1998: 131-2) also recognises the difference between translation exercises in language teaching and the teaching of translation for a professional career. She suggests that the concept of translation in the two contexts needs to be defined differently. Translation for foreign language learning is “reproducing the message of the ST while paying attention to different linguistic structures”. This is a kind of decoding-encoding translation. On the other hand, translation for professional purposes involves “text production for specific purposes”, which would entail that in simulated translation attention is focused rather on the function of the text.

Related to this is another difference, which is that in “foreign-language acquisition, many texts tend to be isolated fragments, because they are used to check student mastery of specific features (vocabulary, syntax, etc.), whereas texts in translation classes are coherent, run-on texts” (Dollérup 2005: 81), just as in real translation.

2 The origins of pedagogical translation

The use of translation for the purposes of language teaching is bound to be associated with the Grammar-Translation Method, which was first employed in the secondary schools of Prussia at the end of the 18th century. The method appeared as a reaction to a social need, as the teaching of modern languages to masses of learners required changes in earlier practices of language teaching. The Grammar-Translation Method was a modified version of the ancient Scholastic Method, which was traditionally used to study the written form of the classical languages through a meticulous lexical and grammatical analysis of classic texts. This method involved, as a natural component of language learning, producing translations of parts of the original text.

The Grammar-Translation Method aimed to make the language learner’s task easier by using, instead of whole texts, artificially made-up sentences illustrating particular grammatical features. Such graded example sentences were translated into or out of the target language in writing. Thus the Grammar-Translation Method, while bringing changes to the structure of the syllabus and the materials used, also preserved the focus of the Scholastic Method on grammar and on written language.

The essence of the Scholastic Method is well summarised in Hell (2009). In ancient Rome, there were basically three levels of education. In the elementary classes children learned, beside other skills, to read and write. They then moved on into grammar school, where they received further linguistic instruction. After finishing the grammar school, at around the age of 13, they could enrol in a rhetorical school, providing education for would-be orators, which included studying texts by renowned authors, learning the techniques of argumentation, acquiring the skills of producing and embellishing texts for effect.

Since in the imperial age Rome became practically bilingual, in the grammatical classes Latin as well as Greek texts were used for educational purposes. This would lead to the practice of relying on translation as a tool for analysing and interpreting the contents of literary works. As in the grammatical classes the focus was on the analysis of lexical items, the interpretation of texts took the form of a kind of word-for-word translation.

As opposed to this kind of literal translation done in the grammatical schools, in rhetorical schools children were instructed in a more sophisticated, literary form of translation. According to Pliny, this practice has the following advantages: It enriches one’s vocabulary, increases the number of figures of speech one can use, develops the ability of interpretation, and through the

imitation of the best writers it makes us able to produce similarly good texts, because translation forces us to notice such details as would escape the attention of a simple reader (Hell 2009: 9).

3 Translation in the classroom: pros and cons

The usefulness of translation in the practice of foreign language teaching has long been brought into question. The objections against the use of translation in language teaching seem to be a reaction which was evoked by the obvious shortcomings of the Grammar-Translation Method, the dominant form of language teaching until the 20th century.

The first voice to cry out against the use of translation in foreign language teaching came from the Reform Movement of the late 19th century, and it was followed by a wave of renewed attacks by proponents of the Audio-Lingual, the Direct, the Natural, and the Communicative Language Teaching Methods throughout the 20th century. The Reform Movement was based on three fundamental principles (Malmkjær 1998: 3): (a) the primacy of speech, (b) the importance of connected text in language learning, and (c) the priority of oral classroom methodology. On this basis the use of isolated, out-of-context sentences, especially in written translation tasks, can be considered detrimental to the process of foreign language acquisition, because it hinders the contextualised or situationalised use of language in spoken communication.

To take a well-known example of such voices, Bloomfield (1933), speaking in the American context, blames the “eighteenth-century scheme of pseudo-grammatical doctrine and puzzle-solving translation”, which was kept alive by pupils who began their foreign language studies too late and incompetent teachers “who talked about the foreign language instead of using it”, for the relative lack of success of foreign language instruction in America, compared with Europe. The problem with the use of translation in language teaching, he writes, is that “[t]ranslation into the native language is bound to mislead the learner, because the semantic units of different languages do not match, and because the student, under the practised stimulus of the native form, is almost certain to forget the foreign one” (Bloomfield 1933: 505).

In other words, the problem is twofold. The first is that translation conceals the differences that exist between the systems of the two languages, and the second is that translation, by providing the wrong sort of stimulus, fails to reinforce correct foreign language behaviour. It is easy to notice the theoretical driving forces of the criticism here: structural linguistics and behaviourism. The behaviourist conception of language learning was introduced by the psychologist B. F. Skinner in his book *Verbal Behaviour*. In this book he describes language as a form of behaviour and argues that the first language is acquired by the infant through a stimulus – response – reinforcement cycle, and that language performance arises largely as the result of positive or negative reinforcement. This idea of language learning as habit formation, along with the view of

language as a structural system, lead to the rise of the Audio-Lingual Method of second language teaching, which made use of constant structural drills in the target language followed by instant positive or negative reinforcement from the teacher. Clearly, in such a methodology, translation could not have a role to play.

But people devoted to various other methodologies have also protested against school translation. Newson (1998: 64) provides a summary of the main objections in the following way. Translation, he writes, “does not allow or make easy the achievement of such generally accepted foreign language teaching aims as” (1) fluency in spoken language, (2) the controlled introduction of selected and graded structures and lexical items, or (3) the controlled introduction of communicative strategies. Translation leads to no observable learning effect, either of new vocabulary or structural items, and does not foster communicative language use.

As for the first of these objections, it only stands if we think of translation as an exclusively written form of activity. Translation, however, can also be performed orally, and can thus, in principle, be used to develop spoken language fluency. Also, there is no theoretical reason why translation exercises could not be used to introduce or practice structures or lexical items, which would eliminate the second objection. Newson (1998: 67) offers two such classroom activities. The first one is a simultaneous oral translation exercise in which the teacher reads out source language sentences whose translations by the learners will provide them with examples of selected target language patterns. Parenthetically, this kind of oral translation is simply a mildly modified version of the characteristic sentence translation task of the Grammar-Translation Method. The other activity uses, instead of isolated sentences, examples of a few sentences long, where the task is not to translate the whole text, but only certain expressions in it which exemplify selected language features. An additional advantage of such tasks, as Stibbard (1998) points out, is that the use of the mother tongue in translation exercises, for example, and also in oral summary tasks, can reduce the anxiety level of the learner in the early stages of language learning.

Malmkjær (1998: 5) lists a number of further general objections to school translation, which are the following. Translation (4) is independent of the four skills which define language competence: reading, writing, speaking and listening; (5) it is radically different from the four skills; (6) it takes up valuable time which could be used to teach these four skills; (7) it is unnatural; (8) it misleads students into thinking that expressions in two languages correspond one-to-one; (9) it produces interference; (10) it prevents students from thinking in the foreign language; and (11) it is a bad test for language skills. Since the objection under (11) does not concern the use of translation in teaching the foreign language but its use in checking the results of language teaching, it will be dealt with separately in Section 4.

The objections under (4)–(6) are all based on the traditional assumption that competence in a language is exclusively a matter of the four skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing, and has nothing to do with skill in translation. Moreover, Lado (1964: 54) contends that translation is a psychologically more complex skill than speaking, listening, reading or writing and since it cannot be achieved without mastery of the second language, it should be taught only after the second language has been acquired, as an independent skill, if necessary. But as modern cognitive theories (e.g. Fodor 1983 or Anderson 1992) describe the processes of speaking, listening, reading and writing as all relying on a form of mental translation, the idea that translation as a skill should be regarded as separate from, or subsequent to, the other four skills, does not seem well-founded.

Malmkjær (1998:8), for instance, argues that since translation is impossible without reading, writing, speaking and listening, it is “in fact dependent on and inclusive of them, and language students who are translating will be forced to practice them”, even though, admittedly, teaching a language through translation may not always be the most time-efficient means. Essentially the same point is made, in connection with translation and foreign language writing skills, in Vermes (2003). So the exclusion of translation competence from the range of language skills to be developed must be attributed to centuries of negative experience concerning the pedagogical uses of translation, as Lesznyák (2003: 67) points out, rather than to its independence or difference from the other skills.

At first sight the argument about the unnatural nature of translation mentioned under (7) is really not easy to understand, in view of the fact that translation has been part of human life for millennia. The point probably concerns the kind of translation that was practiced in foreign language classrooms, rather than translation practiced outside of the classroom. However, since a large part of the world’s population is bi- or multilingual, Malmkjær (1998: 8) claims that there is no reason why we should not regard translation as a natural skill in its own right and why it could not be used as a natural classroom activity. Stibbard (1998) also voices the opinion that since translation is a universally useful activity, even in monolingual societies, it is a skill whose development should also be incorporated in a teaching programme alongside the other four language skills.

As Lengyel and Navracscics (1996: 60) show, there is some neurolinguistic evidence to suggest that the human brain is predisposed to acquire more than one language, and in this context the role of translation must also be re-examined. In their study, Lengyel and Navracscics look at the question whether translation is as natural a language activity as are speaking, listening, writing and reading, and whether translation also has inherited elements. They carried out a translation experiment with four groups of primary school children of different ages, in which the children were asked to “translate” (decode and encode) a short text in an artificial language into Hungarian. They were provided with explanations on the vocabulary and the grammar of the text. There was a general improvement

observed in the children's performance from grade to grade, which was remarkable because they did not receive explicit instruction in translation during their studies. This makes Lengyel and Navracsics believe that translation is "a latent component of language competence which, to a certain extent, develops itself" (1996: 60).

The idea that translation skills are connected with language competence also occurs in a study by Selinker (1996: 103, cited in Malmkjær 1998: 1), who argues that since translation equivalents contribute to the formation of interlanguage competence in language learners, learners' ability to translate may be related to their L2 competence. If this is the case, the use of translation in L2 education may foster the acquisition of the foreign language. Also, Stibbard (1998) cites a study by Cummins (1981), who provides evidence for the hypothesis that experience in either the source or the target language can promote the development of the common proficiency underlying both languages.

Objection (8) can be exemplified by Lado (1964: 53-4, cited in Malmkjær 1998:5). Lado argues against school translation on the following grounds: (a) There are few, if any, fully equivalent words in two languages. (b) Supposing that the words in the two languages are equivalent, the learner will mistakenly think that the translations can be used in the same situations as the originals. Such overextensions produce interference phenomena in language acquisition. (c) Word-for-word translations result in incorrect constructions.

Heltai (1996), in a study of lexical errors in learners' translations, finds evidence that seems to support the idea of Lado (1964) that the greatest difficulty for the language learner is to master one-to-many correspondences between the first and the second language. The findings suggest that language learners at the intermediate level are not prepared to do translation in the true sense of the term. Their translations are dominated by decoding and encoding processes, and exemplify a kind of semantic translation in which only the referential function of the text is observed. Learners' translations are clearly different from professional translations in this regard.

Learners' translations also frequently contain errors of syntactic and lexical decoding and encoding, whereas "in professional translation grammatical and lexical contrasts, ideally, do not cause interference" (Heltai 1996: 80). Interference, however, may occur in any language learning situation, whether or not translation is used as a teaching procedure. Thus interference, the objection cited under (9), cannot logically be held to be a consequence of translation, and as Malmkjær (1998:8) points out, translation exercises have the advantage that they encourage awareness and control of such phenomena.

As for point (10), it can be noted that it concerns not only translation but, more generally, any form of the use of the mother tongue in the foreign language classroom. In connection with the presentation of new vocabulary, Harmer (1991: 162) writes that it is not always easy to translate the new words and "even where translation is possible, it may make it a bit too easy for students by

discouraging them from interacting with the words". The old idea of the inhibitive role of the mother tongue seems to return here.

He also raises objections against the use of translation in checking the understanding of new language, although he admits that it can be used efficiently in monolingual classes, where all the learners share a common first language. He says the main disadvantages are that it cannot be used with classes of different nationalities and that it is not always possible to translate a target language expression exactly, as "[n]ot all languages have words for exactly the same concepts, and it is often the case that in a given language there is not really a word which means the same as a word in another language" (Harmer 1991: 71).

Checking understanding is especially important when the teacher instructs the students on how to carry out an activity. In this case, it may be a good idea in monolingual classes, Harmer suggests (1991: 240), "to get a translation of these instructions to make sure the students have understood".

On the whole, Harmer appears to advise caution in the use of the mother tongue and suggests that a consistent policy towards its use will be helpful for both teacher and students. The question is, of course, what this policy should be. Should we discourage the use of the mother tongue?

Vienne (1998) is in favour of using the mother tongue in the language classroom, provided it is focused on problems which are related to the foreign language and the culture, or on the relationship between the mother tongue and the foreign language, or the relationship between the two cultures in question. Such activities will raise awareness not only of the two languages but also of the two cultures, as also pointed out in Vermes (1999).

4 Translation in language testing

As Duff (1989: 5) observes, "today translation is largely ignored as a valid activity for language practice and improvement. And even where it is still retained, it tends to be used not for language teaching, but for testing". This use of translation in foreign language teaching has also been the object of criticism for several reasons.

Gatenby (1967: 69-70, cited in in Malmkjær 1998:5) contends that because of the frequent lack of literal translation equivalents across languages, translation, especially literal translation, cannot be used for testing language understanding. Another reason why testing by translation is inadequate in language teaching, in Gatenby's opinion, is that it goes counter to the aim of the teaching process, which is to enable the learners to use the target language fluently by training them to dissociate it from the mother tongue.

According to Newson (1998: 64), there are two main points of criticism concerning the use of translation as a means of testing language competence. One concerns its unreliability as a measure of language command, the other concerns the fact that "it presents the examinee with random translation problems". The examination candidate is generally expected to be able to

translate any text written in the target language, which tacitly implies that “the potential resources of the entire language are being tested”. Newson suggests this situation may be improved if the texts to be used in the examinations are selected through a series of filters, including genre, subject matter, originality and length of the text. Such filters will enable the language teacher to select texts for classroom work that will make predictable what it is that the learner is expected to know at the exam.

Källkvist (1998) also tackles an objection to the use of translation to test language proficiency. This often quoted objection is based on the observation that there is no reliable empirical evidence to the effect that there is any correlation between proficiency levels established through translation tests and through other, independent measures of proficiency. Källkvist’s paper examines lexical errors induced in free compositions and in translations. The study finds that translation tests induce higher proportions of lexical errors than free compositions do. An explanation for this may be that in translation tests examinees are deprived of avoidance strategies, which may mask such errors in free composition tests. Such avoidance, or reduction, strategies include the avoidance of a topic, message abandonment mid-stream, message reduction to something vaguer, or meaning replacement/semantic avoidance (Chesterman 1998: 136-7). Källkvist’s results seem to support the view that if translation is used as a testing tool, it should be used in conjunction with other production tests which each focus on different aspects of the learner’s general language proficiency.

5 Conclusion

So should translation have a role to play in foreign language teaching? It seems from the above discussion that there are some good reasons in favour of the inclusion of translation exercises in the foreign language syllabus or, at least, that there are no fundamental reasons for its exclusion. The objections to the use of translation in foreign language teaching are all based on a limited view of translation. But translation is not only structure manipulation; it is primarily a form of communication. And as such, it necessarily involves interaction and cooperation between people, which makes it a potentially very useful device in foreign language teaching. Obviously, this answer leads to a number of other questions, concerning the level of language proficiency at which translation may be most useful, the kinds of translation exercises that may be useful, or the purposes which translation may usefully serve in language teaching. A detailed discussion of these issues, however, will have to be given in a separate paper.

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