

REEVALUATING THE USE OF TRANSLATION IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

Professor David MACIAS
UEES School of Foreign Languages and Applied Linguistics
Professor Sara R. BENET
UEES School of Translation and Interpretation
Dean Monica D. REYNOSO
College of International Studies
Universidad de Especialidades Espíritu Santo--UEES
Guayaquil (ECUADOR)

SUMMARY

The grammar-translation method has been consigned to oblivion, particularly in our field. In fact, with a strong focus on the direct method and the communicative approach, the use of the L1 by the student and translation exercises (into and from the foreign language) are avoided in the foreign language classroom. However, it is precisely these exercises that allow the language learner, especially in advanced stages of the acquisition/learning process, to improve language *granularity*, both at the lexical and grammatical level.

Likewise, translation and interpretation exercises can serve to bring the student to a deeper understanding of the target language and culture, given that he/she must fully dominate linguistic elements (grammar and vocabulary) and non-linguistic elements (contexts, jokes, proverbs). The purpose of this paper is to reveal the value of translation/interpretation as an interesting tool in the teaching and learning of a foreign language.

1. INTRODUCTION

Translation has been practically completely eliminated from second and foreign language teaching. Indeed, the focus in teaching is on the use of the direct method with a communicative approach. As a result, many teachers have opted for eliminating the use of the L1 (in our case, Spanish) and translation exercises in the classroom. However, we must ask ourselves how positive this teaching strategy is for all learners.

In a student-centered classroom the focus is on respect for each student's differences. Therefore, the teacher must respect, at least in theory, the different ways that students learn. And it is indeed possible for the direct method to have positive outcomes for some students. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that for generations the grammar-translation method has also had positive outcomes, and this dates back to the Middle Ages (Western world).

During *The Middle Ages*, European scribes translated texts in order to spread "the word of God." The main duty of many monks in monasteries was to translate Latin, Greek and even Hebrew and Arabic texts into vernacular languages (Old Spanish, Old French, etc.) for their diffusion. In this way these texts could be understood by the "common folk" who did not speak the educated languages. This was the beginning of the teaching method that today we call *grammar-translation*. You see, in those times the most important skills were *writing skills* (comprehension and written production) because

texts had become the medium by which to spread not only religion but science and the humanities, as well. Translation into a foreign language and into one's mother tongue became common learning activities. Mastery of L1 and L2 grammar was an important aspect of the learning process.

Nevertheless, the noble and bourgeoisie families understood that in order to learn a language one needed to be able to communicate in it. ***During the industrial era***, it was common for wealthy families in England and other countries to hire a French nanny so that their children would learn French (known as the nanny method – *méthode de la nourrice*). It was also common to send children abroad, with the same goal of helping them learn a foreign language (known as the immersion method – *la méthode bain Marie*). It was empirically shown how interacting in an environment where language X was spoken, resulted in language learning (perhaps the individual would not learn it perfectly, but he/she would certainly acquire comprehension and communication skills in the target language). And this is how ***the direct method*** came into use in the classroom, in which all ***class interactions were solely conducted in the foreign language***. This method primarily focused on the acquisition of oral skills (comprehension and oral expression) and the teaching of the foreign culture, which is why native teachers were preferred.

With this new focus on the acquisition of oral skills, language schools became popular, especially in merchant nations where there was a great need to communicate in the target language. Over the last few centuries this approach to communication has been enriched by scientific developments (first in Psychology, then in Linguistics, and today in Neuroscience). Slowly, translation and grammar faded into the background and have nearly disappeared from the teaching methods and manuals used today.

We believe the use of translation exercises in the foreign language classroom should be re-evaluated and the use of interpretation in the foreign language classroom should be recognized as an advanced communicative approach[1]. That is why we seek to reevaluate the use of translation in the language classroom as one more exercise used in learning another language (second or foreign). In fact, we believe that translation may contribute to the acquisition of greater ***granularity*** at the lexical and grammatical levels. Additionally, these types of exercises allow for greater intercultural comprehension between the source language/culture and the target language/culture. Finally, we shall look at how it can be used in the classroom to develop competencies that are applicable to academic and professional life.

2. Learning/Acquiring Vocabulary

Under a communicative approach, the learner learns/acquires vocabulary within everyday contexts. Lexical richness is limited to these situations, that is, to a language's most commonly used words. As a result, a student under a communicative approach will achieve a level of lexical mastery that is on par with, for example, the average lexicon of a native speaker. However, if the learner wishes to achieve a higher level he/she must be familiar with texts in that language. Studying authentic [2] text types would help him/her to acquire a richer vocabulary than an average speaker. In this way, we can see how translation exercises can offer certain advantages.

2.1. Advantages

The use of translation helps students learn vocabulary in context. Sight translation develops the ability to quickly decode a meaning and express it using the exact term or by paraphrasing. Both Translation and sight translation also allow them to enrich their vocabulary, which leads to a higher granularity of language production, both oral and written.

2.1.1. Learning vocabulary in context

Through the use of texts, vocabulary is learned in context. And this is important insofar as a word may have different meanings depending on its co(n)text. For example,

(1) *a smart boy* is not the same as a

(2) *a smart car*.

Isolated, the word *smart* has different meanings. Under a communicative approach, the learner is only familiarized with the most common meanings: “*listo*” and “*inteligente*.” However, as shown in example 2, *smart* has other meanings. *A smart car* is not a “*carro inteligente*” but rather a “*carro elegante*.”

In this way, translation exercises allow the learner to become familiar with the multilevel meanings a word may have, while at the same time increasing their vocabulary and offering them greater granularity in their discourse. The learner also develops the ability to make the right word choice (diction) and can work on register.

2.1.2. Increase lexical “granularity”

As explained by Colette NOYAU, Professor of Language Sciences at the Universidad de Nanterre, granularity gives learners greater precision in their discourse. In fact, at the first stages of language learning, the learner’s interlingua is quite limited. For example, for a beginner Spanish student, the word *casa* corresponds to, *grosso modo*, an enclosed living space. Language learners learn a sign (signifier and signified, following the definitions proposed by Saussure) *prototype* and use this sign to refer to things that are similar to each other in the real world. And although they understand that the objects are not identical, they lack the exact signifier in their lexicon. So, the signifier *casa* will be used for various signifieds, such as *apartamento*, *suite*, *choza*, etc. Although these signifieds are not exactly the same, they are semantically related: they all relate to housing. And despite the learner’s poor language granularity during the first stages of learning, it will increase as the learner acquires more vocabulary.

In addition to promoting lexical accuracy, translation exercises can also increase fluency. It is precisely the high granularity of language that often causes beginning language learners to feel limited in their ability to produce such precise language in their foreign language. However, using synonyms in their own language and translating them can help them overcome this limitation, avoid the ensuing frustration and achieve greater fluency. And by using a hierarchy of synonyms in the L1, a teacher can bring the student closer to an approximate synonym. For example, the student learning English knows the word *choza* in their native language, but does not know the English equivalent. They may attempt to translate in their head, which interrupts their fluency, causing them to say, “I don’t know” or to reach for a dictionary. By encouraging monolingual synonyms, the teacher not only promotes word approximations, but along the way, can teach a whole host of word families (*villa*, *estate*, *cottage*, *yurt*, *summer house*, *adobe house*, *stucco*, etc). Students may consider synonyms like *cabaña* /

casucha / barraca and even *casita* which they can then translate as “small house.” Whereas “hut” would be the best word (translation), the phrase “small house,” does keep the meaning intact, and allows them to continue with a fluid discourse.

2.2. How to use translation in accordance with the MECR levels

Lexical acquisition occurs slowly, as we have seen. Deciding on exactly what type of vocabulary to teach at each level is a complicated task. However, MECR proposes starting with the concrete and moving toward the abstract, and with the most common toward the least common.

2.2.1. Level A: Teach phrases (*chunks*) that are of communicational use

During the first stages of learning, it is difficult to understand the target language, especially when trying to explain vocabulary related to abstract elements. In order to achieve written and oral production, we need to be able to first decode the input that we receive. Using occasional translation exercises during these stages of acquisition, can lead to fast learning of phrases and vocabulary, thus speeding up the learning process. Teachers and learners can agree on defining a base of phrases that will be used for communication in the classroom. Students can propose the phrases in their mother tongue, and the teacher can indicate the proper translation.[2] The teacher can also choose to introduce vocabulary and phrases that are related to communicative functions such as how to greet one another, ask about dates, time, etc.

2.2.2. Level B: Move from authentic pedagogical texts to untouched texts

During intermediate stages, learners can begin to translate authentic pedagogical texts and progressively move on to less pedagogical texts. An authentic text is a text (that can be written or oral, according to the Anglo Saxon didactic,) used by native speakers to communicate and transmit information. Authentic texts can, in a translation exercise, present elements that are too complex for students to decode. For this reason, we propose using pedagogical texts at intermediate levels so that they can be more accessible for learners.

During intermediate stages, texts can be chosen that have useful lexical elements (vocabulary related to the family, the home, etc.). Translation exercises give present the learner with more complex vocabulary than what was learned at the initial stages. In this way, regarding the semantic field of the family, the students could learn words such as *cuñado, suegro, sobrino*, etc. We feel it is important to note that for vocabulary to be stored in the long-term memory, it must be practiced constantly. This can be done through translation exercises or written production activities in which students use the new vocabulary.

2.2.3. Level C: Use authentic texts

During advanced stages, learners ought to have a level of lexical interpretation that allows them to understand all the nuances and possible interpretations of a word. That is why it is important to use different text types (communicative, literary, scientific, etc.). At these levels the target vocabulary is more elaborate than at previous levels. By using

different texts the learner has access to the different meanings a word can have in a determined context.

The word *capaz* can be found in the following contexts:

(3) ¿Serías capaz de hacerlo? ('Would you do it?' /S/)

(4) No serías capaz de hacerlo. ('You wouldn't dare to do it' /S/)

(5) Capaz que le dijiste que venga. ('I bet you told him to come over' /S/)

As you can see, the English translation of the Spanish allows us to perceive the different meanings of *capaz*, as well as the different interpretations on the phrasal level. Also, *capaz* in the Spanish expression *capaz que* is very idiomatic and colloquial, whereas the previous expressions are of a higher register.

3. The learning /acquisition of target language grammar

Granularity is not merely related to lexicon, but also to grammar. For example, it indicates which moment of development a specific process (action) is at: the beginning, the middle or the end. This information is found in verbal paraphrasing, signals or verbal inflection. Grammar mastery allows learners to express themselves with greater precision, and the translation of texts that include those levels of precision allow learners to understand and integrate this grammar.

3.1. Advantages

3.1.1. To foment three-dimensional grammar learning: form/meaning/use.

According to Larsen-Freeman, ESL professor from the University of Michigan, the complete understanding of grammar is achieved using here factors: form (morphosyntaxis), meaning (semantics) and use (sociolinguistic and pragmatic). In order to come up with an accurate translation of a grammatical element, it is necessary to understand certain elements, as shown in the teaching of past tenses in Spanish. Learners of Spanish as a foreign language at intermediate stages tend to use these tenses and explicitly understand them. Nevertheless, they often fail to use them in the right way. In other words, these learners understand the theory but fail to apply it correctly. Translation exercises can help them to assimilate the correct use of this grammar point in appropriate contexts.

3.1.2. To compare and contrast grammar of both languages: contrastive linguistics

At advanced stages, Spanish students may still make mistakes when telling a story using the past tense. This is because in English, reference to the past is made with just one signifier (the *simple past*) whereas in Spanish, there are two simple past tenses (the *preterit* and the *imperfect indicative*). This grammatical nuance expressed by two past tenses in Spanish does not exist in English, making it difficult for English speakers to acquire (the same occurs in other languages where this contrast does not exist). Therefore, translation exercises can be useful in helping learners learn to make this distinction. Additionally, language teachers can use translation to anticipate the problems that learners will have in expressing their ideas in the target language. Learners learn to express themselves idiomatically in the target language because they will have developed a sense of meaning units (ideas) rather than words (literal translation). So they will be aware that "between no more and drink a chair" is nonsensical in English and doesn't mean "come on in and have a seat" (English for original Spanish "entre nomás y tome asiento." Although more idiomatic and higher

register Spanish would be to say “pase adelante, tome asiento,” "please come in and have a seat". Back-translation is very useful for language manipulation (meaning units) and to go back and forth between them, switching gears in a natural way.

3.2. Application based on MECR levels

3.2.1. Level A: Translation of useful phrases for communication

The translation of *phrase book* phrases can help the student to communicate and realize how useful it is to learn the target language. As suggested by Hagege, it is ideal during the first stages of the learning process, to learn elements of the language that help with communication. The learner can then feel satisfied every time they see that the interlocutor understands what they say. This satisfaction becomes motivation, which in turn encourages the learner to advance in their learning process.

These phrases facilitate grammatical information (morphosyntax) that can be implicitly integrated by the learner. Indeed, just as a child slowly integrates phrases without explicitly identifying how the verbs are conjugated and what the subject and objects are, etc. We simply learn these phrases, or *chunks*: *tengo hambre*, *tengo frío*, *quiero salir*, etc. In later stages of learning, after having acquired these phrases, learners can move onto grammatical analysis in order to acquire the explicit knowledge of the grammar rules.

3.2.2. Level B: From translation for grammar purposes to the translation of short texts

At this level the teacher may use translation for grammar purposes and slowly integrate the use of short texts with simple vocabulary and grammar. The teacher can choose phrases that contain a grammar point they would like to teach. For example, in the teaching of the Spanish verb *to be* to English speakers, students could be given English phrases that include the verb to translate. They would have to choose between *ser* and *estar* in function of the context of the message that the speaker wishes to transmit.

3.2.3. Level C: The translation of texts that include linguistic elements that are difficult to acquire

In advanced levels, learners can proceed to translate more complex texts. The exercise of translation allows the learner to acquire a defined bilingualism, through the process of correctly identifying the grammatical patterns that characterize a language and trying to reproduce them in another. In this way the learner avoids, in theory, possible interferences from the L1 in the L2 and vice versa.

4. A better understanding of the target language/culture

In this day and age, second-language acquisition must reach minimum excellence standards in order to constitute real competencies. In our case, English is not only a second language; it is also a professional competency. Therefore, students as future professionals do not only need to know the language, they need to be able to understand the target language in order to interact with English speaking people.

4.1. Translation of proverbs and images

Culture is reflected in language through proverbs and images. Through the translation of culturally bound proverbs, students can learn about the nuances of the target language, while comparing and contrasting nuances in their native language.

4.2. Translation of cultural situations

The act of bridging the linguistic gap between languages (through translation) is no easy task, especially insofar as language is a product of culture, and all that it encompasses (history, tradition, worldview, etc). And trying to bridge a cultural gap, through language, is harder yet. Classroom discussions on the "untranslatable" prove to be revealing and thought provoking, as do translation exercises of culturally bound situations. This is true at the lexical level, and at the conceptual level. A term like *Communism* could be difficult to translate into a target language that belongs to a culture with a different political regime than the source language. Whereas, for some people *Communism* means justice, struggle and equality, to others it means injustice, oppression and war. When translating this term, the student would have to first analyze its connotations in the source language, to see if they are compatible with the connotations in the target language. This is an example of a term that has a lexical equivalent in the other language, but where there may be a conceptual/connotational difference.

Cultural situations can be especially interesting to translate when there is no cultural equivalent in the other language. In Latin America *El día de los muertos* is quite different from the Anglo-Saxon *Halloween*. In translation exercises students are faced with the question of how to bridge this cultural gap: should we translate this holiday with its closest equivalent or should be simply explain it? These kinds of discussions provide interesting insight into both cultures. The Spanish term *yapa* used in some South American countries to refer to the extra amount of food a restaurant or storekeeper gives the client for free would present the same translation "problem." With no equivalent that comes to mind in English, the student would be forced to research the concept to be able to explain it, thus learning more about the source/target languages and cultures.

4.3. Translation of the subtleties of the target language

It is said that a translator dissects a text even more than the original author. When faced with the task of translation, students are forced to split hairs and deeply analyze language subtleties. Without the task translation into ones mother tongue, language students settle for achieving a general understanding of a text, rather than pausing to appreciate and understand the nuances and subtleties of the foreign language. Also tied to culture, this exercise forces the student to do a comparative analysis of both languages and cultures.

5. Developing Competencies

Analytical and research skills as well as adeptness in using translation tools and resources (such as monolingual dictionaries and glossaries, on-line aids, and consultation with experts) allow the individual to proceed methodically and verify the appropriateness of the equivalents chosen. These skills can be developed in the language classroom and can be acquired throughout the language learning process.

5.1. To make educated guesses from context (sight translation)

Sight translation promotes fluency in the same way that interpretation exercises does: it forces the student to go beyond comprehension and take the next step into a fluid oral rendition (in this case, of a text) in the target language, using quick thinking to get through difficult passages. Moreover, reading words and phrases in context aids the student in producing language that makes sense within a given context. Due to language granularity, the student may be familiar with a term but not the use of it in said context. Sight translation forces them to make an educated guess based on probability, helping them understand that context can give them clues when their own vocabulary limits them.

In an Argentine newspaper article on the national debt, students can read:

“Argentina cayó en mora por más de 80 mil millones de dólares de deuda en 2001. Con los intereses, la cuenta creció a más de 100 mil millones de dólares. La mora provocó el colapso económico y sumergió a más de la mitad del país en la pobreza.”

They not only see the phrase being used in a real context, but the context gives them clues about the meaning (“It must mean to default,” or a ballpark approximation: “It is related to the country’s debt”), before they even learn the phrase. Learning words and phrases in context not only helps students with proper usage, but teaches them to rely on context for meaning, which in turn promotes fluency.

5.2. To use and apply grammar to decipher meaning

In order to translate accurately the learner will need to resort to grammar analysis and a process methodology.

For example: *cross-cultural world trade international expert conference*.

In order to translate this into Spanish, you need to "unpack the series", manipulate grammar and decipher meaning. Like this:

What? Conference

What kind of Conference? International Conference

Who is the actor in that Conference? Experts

In Spanish: Conferencia Internacional de Expertos

What are these people experts in? Cross-cultural world trade

In Spanish: Comercio mundial intercultural.

>>Now we put these two pieces of the puzzle together in Spanish and we have:

Conferencia Internacional de Expertos en Comercio Mundial Intercultural

Further: We can also analyze why the phrase does NOT translate as:
Conferencia Intercultural sobre Expertos Internacionales en Comercio Mundial (it simply does not make much sense)

5.3. To understand and apply punctuation rules differences

Differences in punctuation rules are often so subtle, that they go unperceived by the language learner. Simply reading authentic foreign language texts may not be enough to draw their attention to these subtle differences. When faced with the task of translating into or out of their L1, students become much more aware of these differences. And working with different text types, helps reveal different writing styles, from more obvious differences such as differences in capitalization rules to more subtle discrepancies such as the different way lists are numbered and bulleted in Spanish and English, and the different use of the semicolon, etc.

6. Conclusion

Translation/interpretation should be re-evaluated and re-inserted in foreign language learning curricula. As we have shown, the process of transferring a text or an oral message from one language into another, are complex skills requiring several abilities. Therefore, when used conveniently, they constitute important tools for language learning.

These kinds of exercises help students further develop both written and oral language skills (grammar, syntax, idioms) going beyond the communicative approach. The communicative approach sets as an objective the native-like mastery. Hence, it establishes goals suitable for a higher-intermediate level (B2-C1 in the Common European Framework of Reference). Translation and interpretation push the learner to a higher level of foreign language command. This is important in advanced level students such as language teachers. Indeed, teachers should be able to go beyond native-like mastery in order to understand and interpret the nuances and subtleties of the target language. This will help him/her to be a more efficient teacher. Testing the level of foreign language reading comprehension, listening, and writing skills of students who have used basic translation and interpretation exercises in their foreign language learning/acquisition process reveals a higher level of performance. It also reveals a higher level of self-confidence and mastery.

Although we can use translation techniques let's not confuse a translation/interpretation class with a language class. Students shouldn't be assessed on their *translation skills* but in their *language skills*.

[1] While the term *translation* is normally reserved for written renditions of written materials, the term *interpretation* refers to a spoken equivalent between two languages. *Sight translation* is considered a hybrid between translation and interpretation since it offers an oral rendition of a written text across two languages. There are correspondences between translation and interpretation skills, therefore, both constitute excellent language learning tools.

[2] We are not saying that the classroom working language must be the mother tongue. We believe that the target language should be used in the classroom as much as possible. However, introducing new vocabulary, particularly of an abstract nature, the use of translation will accelerate the process. We also think that using the target language exclusively, when trying to explain **humor**, is a rather difficult task.

References and Bibliography

1. ILR--Interagency Language Roundtable

The **Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) scale** is a set of descriptions of abilities to communicate in a language. It was originally developed by the [United States Foreign Service Institute](#), the predecessor of the [National Foreign Affairs Training Center](#) (NFATC). Thus it is also often called **Foreign Service Levels**. It consists of descriptions of five levels of language proficiency.

2. ILR --Interagency Language Roundtable

Skill Level Descriptions for Translation Performance - Approved June 23, 2006

3. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment, or CEFR, is a guideline used to describe achievements of learners of foreign languages across [Europe](#). It was put together by the [Council of Europe](#) as the main part of the project "Language Learning for European Citizenship" between [1989](#) and [1996](#). Its main aim is to provide a method of assessing and teaching which applies to all languages in Europe. In November [2001](#) a European Union Council Resolution recommended using the CEFR to set up systems of validation of language ability. The six reference levels (see below) are becoming widely accepted as the standard for grading an individual's language proficiency. Nonetheless, existing examination boards have retained their own naming conventions, e.g. "Intermediate", which are, arguably, easier for them, and their students, to remember.