

Translation in The Foreign Language Class Is there a Pedagogical Place?

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Abstract

Translation has always been avoided by most teachers of foreign languages who hold that this teaching technique is not part of their competence. Some decades ago, foreign language teachers had always been reminded not to rely on translation in their teaching task. It was widely thought that teaching a foreign language through translation was a real barrier to progress and achievement in general. The aim of this paper is to present some arguments in favor of the use of translation in the foreign language class today

Introduction:

Among the linguistic phenomena that the foreign language teacher encounters in the classroom, linguistic interference is probably the most recurrent. The latter emerges when features proper to the mother tongue are undeliberately incorporated to the target language by the foreign language learner. This is particularly the case with beginners and intermediates who translate literally from their source language. It seems that this phenomenon is inevitable and is part of the learning process, as linguistic interference, or “transcoding” is not a deliberate act. Hafedh Brini reminds that linguistic interference occurs whenever a bilingual person uses in either language a characteristic feature that is specific to the other language. So, linguistic interference is usually produced spontaneously by the inevitable co-existence of two or three

different languages especially among beginners. However, when teachers notice this kind of error in the students' writings, which is obviously due to interference from Arabic or French, they often call it "translation".⁽¹⁾

The aim of this paper is not to claim the case for "Translation" as a teaching method nor is it to state that it should be banned from the foreign language classroom. The aim is rather to show that it can contribute to the acquisition of the target language, and that, no matter how much one tries to avoid it, one always finds oneself faced to it in one way or another.

1. Linguistic Interference or Translation?

Translation has long been avoided by most teachers of foreign languages on the grounds that it is difficult and that it is not part of their teaching task or competence. Besides, a few decades ago, foreign language teachers were always reminded not to rely on translation in their teaching. It was widely thought, at that time, that teaching a foreign language via the translation method was a barrier to progress and achievement in general. In "Translation", Alan Duff comments:

Translation has long languished as a poor relation in the family of language teaching techniques. It has been denigrated uncommunicative, boring, pointless, difficult, irrelevant, and the like, and has suffered from a too close an association with its cousin grammar.⁽²⁾

The act of translating is a very difficult task. It requires a lot of information and concentration as it involves the transfer of one culture to another. It is rendered even more difficult and

time-consuming by the very fact that cultures can share dimensions and can also have different/opposed characteristics.

So, exploring the cultural dimensions behind the words, phrases, or sentences is far from being a guessing activity. It involves not only the translation, but also, and especially, interpretation of “tone, irony, metaphor, imagery- all those features of language which need not only to be translated but also interpreted.”⁽³⁾

In the light of the difficulties referred to above, it is understandable that the teachers of foreign languages reject even the idea of having recourse to translation in the classroom. Because they are not specialized in the issue, one can admit that this attitude is justified.

Generally, the argument is that translation revolves around literature, poetry, and scientific materials; therefore, it does not answer the need of the foreign language learner. Justifying the case for translation, Alan Duff, writes:

If translation has fallen from favour in our times, it is largely because teachers feel with some justification that:

- a. It is text-bound and confined to only two skills-reading and writing; it is not a communicative activity because it involves no real interaction.*
- b. It is not suitable for classroom work because the student must do the writing on their own; it is also time-consuming and wasteful.*
- c. It is associated with “different language”, with literary or scientific texts, and it is not suited to the general needs of the language learner.*⁽⁴⁾

2. Linguistic Interference and Language Learning

Our use of foreign language is largely determined by our way of thinking. Generally, one is unaware of the linguistic interference that occurs in L2, especially at the beginning of the learning process. So, source language influence and interference are inevitable linguistic phenomena. When communicating in a foreign language, the learner generally tries to imitate and base his oral and written production on his mother tongue patterns. To say it otherwise, one may say that L2 is, to some certain extent, a ‘calque’ of L1.

The mother tongue is the foundation for the foreign language learning. It exerts an influence on the latter and guides the learner in his task of comprehending and shaping the new language he is introduced to. According to educators, translation not only helps understanding the influence of one language on the other but teaches good habits that help avoid or correct most errors. “In involving contrast, translation shows the differences and similarities of languages as well as the strengths and weaknesses”⁽⁵⁾

Those who advocate the use of translation in the foreign language class do so on the grounds that the communicative approach that has a tendency to be denigrated and avoided today (as it has not worked as satisfactorily as the grammar approach) has excluded that language teaching technique and its benefits. Translation has been long been excluded from the language learning process namely because it was considered as a non-valid activity for the practice and progress of the four basic skills of language, especially listening and speaking.

In recent years, there has been a need for adopting the translation approach after the communicative approach has

shown its weaknesses. Translation, as a traditional practice, has imposed itself again after a long exclusion. A question is posed at this point: Can translation be “reformed” so as to become communicative enough to be included in the teaching program?

It seems that the great merit of translation lies in the fact that today it is advocated as a source for achievement of foreign language learning. According to Alan Duff, the merit of translation is that it

develops three qualities essential to all language learning: accuracy, clarity and flexibility. It trains the learner to search (flexibility) for the most appropriate words (accuracy) to convey what is meant (clarity). ⁽⁶⁾

2. Some Arguments in Favour of Translation in the Foreign Language Classroom

Many teachers and linguists today still think, with some justification, that “there is no place” for translation in the foreign language classroom. One has a tendency to side them, especially when one knows that teaching methodologies, on the whole, do not support it. Conversely, many advocators suggest that translation is widely compatible with the learning process, and that “there is a place in the learning environment for translation.” ⁽⁷⁾

So, advocates are shocked at the discredit of translation. They claim that translation is an efficient tool for second language acquisition (SLA). For them, those who resist translation in the foreign language classroom, do so, as suggested above, on the grounds that it does not appropriately develop the four basic skills of learning, and that it is not communicative.

The questions to be asked at this point are: “How can we keep translation (i.e. the use of any equivalent lexical item of L1 to clarify or exemplify L2) outside the foreign language classroom and ask the learners to forget about their L1? Should we allow the use of L1 only to advanced learners? The answers will differ according to attitudes towards the use of L1 when teaching L2, and according to teaching experiences.

If translation helps the teacher and learner alike (in the process of teaching and learning), then it is successful and valid. Some teachers and linguist go so far as to recommend the use of translation not only at an advanced level, but also at an intermediate one, and claim that its “potential usefulness” should encourage more and more teachers to include it in their methodology.

While most literature available in support of the use of the mother tongue in the class appears to favour its use with advanced level learners, it is possible to apply to classes of students with lower language skills, if it is prudently used. ⁽⁸⁾

Most foreign language teachers agree that translation as a teaching methodology aids some teachers and handicaps others. The latter will always discredit it, justifiably, because they have not the required qualifications, because it is time-consuming, and because it is a very difficult task (that can bring only frustration).

*Translation falls somewhere on the cline below:
literal, faithful, core, idiomatic, and free.* ⁽⁹⁾

Today, the debate is still going on as to whether to incorporate translation in the process of teaching/learning or not. As suggested earlier, translation is successful and

recommended in cases where it works. In other words, if translation succeeds in making the learners aware of its usefulness and validity, if it arouses their curiosity, and if they can relate and compare L1 and L2, then its merit as a useful aid for SLA is established.

Whatever the discredit over translation, the latter can have positive effects on the learners who always use it, unconsciously, for communicative purposes.

Students do, and always will, translate into their L1, no matter how often we exhort them not to. It is a student's learning strategy which is called "a learner-preferred strategy... and an inevitable part of second language acquisition."⁽¹⁰⁾

4. Translation and Language Learning

Referring to the negative attitude towards translation in the foreign language classroom, Alan Duff remarks that translation is generally ignored as a successful and valid activity for language use and achievement. Stating the merits of translation and the validity of the activity, he further states that when translating,

we will be exploring what lies behind the words, tone innuendo, implication, hidden reference, irony, metaphor, imagery - all those features of language which need not to be translated, but also interpreted⁽¹¹⁾

Translation works when used when/if necessary. We have seen that if translation helps the learner interact in L2 (This is easier when the target language, L2, is closer to the source language, L1), then it can become part of the pedagogical activity. We are aware that translation has always

played an important role in the process of foreign language teaching and that,

Less didactically, over 60% of the world is bi- or multi-lingual” therefore, “translation is an everyday activity for many people, with extremely practical applications⁽¹²⁾

5. Pedagogical Implications

Foreign language teachers generally agree that translation, even if severely discredited, cannot be completely excluded from the classroom. One often hears the foreign language learner ask the following question: “How do we say (word in Arabic, French, Spanish, Italian, etc.) in English? Should one turn a deaf ear to this legitimate, innocent, and above all, pertinent request? By giving the answer, has not one stepped in this “ivory tower” and has not one used “oral translation”? As soon as one gives the equivalent lexical item in a target language, one has embarked in the once forbidden activity: “translation”.

Of course, the term “translation” here does not refer to the interpreting of a text in a target language so as to give the best equivalent text in a source language, but one is rather concerned with “linguistic equivalence” which is an important component of “translation”. At this point, attention is drawn to the fact that lexical items, whatever the language taught, carry particular cultural connotations. In his reference to the importance of the culture-bound connotations that lexical items carry Jonnathan Stoddart states:

Native speakers are aware of these connotations, and so there is little scope or serious misunderstandings between them. However, when

non-native speakers use language, they may be unaware that some L2 expressions are not fully equivalent to an L1 term, which can lead to misunderstanding, or in extreme cases, offence.⁽¹³⁾

Conclusion:

Whatever the foreign language teacher's attitude towards translation, and whatever valid arguments for it or against it, one can say that there is always room for translation (no matter how tiny it is) in the foreign language classroom. This "old-fashioned/fashioned" teaching method, which discourages most foreign language teachers, seems to be imposing itself again, throughout the world, out of pedagogical necessity.

Judging from the wealth of literature concerning the usefulness and the validity and legitimacy of translation in the process of language learning, and being aware of the demerits and especially, the merits of translation, our conclusive remark is that this teaching methodology, if not the best, is far from being the worst. It works wonders in many learning situations. So why not support it and prescribe it, be it at a small dose?

Notes:

1. Hafeedh Brini., On Language, Translation and Stylistics, in www.traduction-officielle.net/translation
2. Alan Duff., Resources Book for Teachers: Translation. Oxford University Press. 1989.
3. Ibid. p. 123
4. Ibid. p. 5
5. ibid. p. 3
6. ibid.
7. Translation in the Classroom: A Useful Tool for Second Language

Acquisition. http://www.cels.bham.ac.uk/resources/essays/cindy_c2pdf. November 30, 2000.

8. *ibid.*

9. Hervey and Higgins (1992) quoted in Jonnathan. Stoddart. *Teaching Through Translation, The British Council Portugal. Journal N° 11, April 2000.*

10. Attinkson quoted in Soddart.

11. Alan Duff. *op. cit.* p. 123.

12. Jonnathan Stoddart. *op. cit.* p. 1.

13. Jonnathan Stoddart. *op. cit.*

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