

Using translation as a learning tool in foreign language learning

Morena Braçaj

1. Introduction

The debate over whether foreign language classrooms should include or exclude students' native language has been a controversial issue for a long time (Brown, 2000). Although the use of mother tongue was banned by the supporters of the Direct Method at the end of the nineteenth century, the positive role of the mother tongue has recurrently been acknowledged as a rich resource which, if used judiciously, can assist second language teaching and learning (Cook, 2001). Therefore, this research study tries to find a thoughtful way to use learners' mother tongue in second language teaching.

In the process of teaching a foreign language, the teacher's use of mother tongue can play a crucial role in the learner's acquisition of the target language. From the turn of the twentieth century onwards; it has been generally assumed that second language should be taught without reference to the learners' first language. It has become a popular belief among teachers that the translation of first language gets in the way with the acquisition of second language. While identifying a language unit in a foreign language (FL), it requires getting the meaning of it, which in other words, involves the act of translating. Their knowledge/cognition is built in their first language (L1). Thus, when people try to understand ideas or meaning in a new SL/FL language, L1 will naturally play a major role in your comprehension. This paper first examines how the translation method has given a way to other methodologies in the practice of second/foreign language (SL/FL) teaching. Following that, it discusses how the act of translating, using translation as a means of learning, can help especially advanced learners' second/foreign language. Therefore, it is important to present the arguments of some theoretician related to this issue. Firstly, the paper is focused on some theoretician's views, which show the disadvantages of using L1 during the teaching of SL and then continues supporting the theories that translation method should be applied in the foreign language classes as a method being effective and necessary for the

Newson (1988) argued that using translation as a teaching and testing tool has four disadvantages. Translation (1) encourages thinking in one language and transferring to another with interference; (2) deprives teacher and learner of the benefit of working within a single language; (3) gives false belief of the idea that there is a perfect one-to-one correspondence between languages; and (4) does not facilitate achievement on the spoken language.

Additionally, Carreres (2006) put forward some arguments against using translation as a language teaching tool:

1. Translation is an artificial exercise that has no place in a communicative methodology. Also, it is restrictive in that it confines language practice to two skills only: reading and writing.
2. Translation into L2 is counterproductive in that it forces learners always to view the foreign language through their mother tongue; this causes interferences and a dependence on L1 that inhibits free expression in L2.

3. Translation into L2 is a purposeless exercise that has no application in the real world, since translators normally operate into and not out of their mother tongue.

4. Translation, particularly into L2, is a frustrating and de-motivating exercise in that the student can never attain the level of accuracy or stylistic polish of the version presented to them by their teacher. It seems to be an exercise designed to elicit mistakes, rather than accurate use of language.

It is also a widely held view that translation is not a suitable exercise in the initial stages of learning (Marsh, 1987). It is argued that, before learners can tackle translation productively, they need to have acquired a significant level of proficiency in the L2 language. They need to have moved beyond beginner's level.

According to Owen (2003) the rationale against using translation is founded on obliging learners to share their precious L2 use time with the L1; this is not a productive use of the opportunities given by the class.

Despite the previous arguments against teaching translation, there are strong arguments for teaching translation. The following section will oppose the arguments against teaching translation. Indeed, translation itself as it takes place in the real world is essentially linked to a communicative purpose. As Duff (1989: 6) puts it, "translation happens everywhere, all the time, so why not in the classroom?"

Learners of a foreign language do refer to their mother tongue to aid the process of acquisition of L2 or, in other words they "translate silently" (Titford 1985: 78). In light of this, translation into L2 can help them systematize and rationalize a learning mechanism that is taking place anyway.

As for the contention that learners will never need to translate into L2 in their practical life, in many cases this is the expression of an ideal situation rather than a description of actual practice. It is arguably true that one needs native command of the target language when translating a text. However, in reality foreign language learners need to translate into L2 to prepare them for what they might find outside the classroom.

2. Literature Review

2. A. How is using translation method in second language learning?

Translation as a teaching tool needs to consider a number of different aspects, such as grammar, syntax, collocation and connotation. Translation is sometimes referred to as the fifth language skill alongside the other four basic skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. 'Translation holds a special importance at an intermediate. Based on data of Mykolas Romeris University, Vilnius, Lithuania showed that translation method can develop of second language learning. Numerous studies indicated that both negative and positive transfer between L1 and L2 was important for development of the inter-language, the complex system of the learners' L2. Many teachers recognize that the L1 in the classroom is a positive representation of the inter-language. The data on the inter-language and language transfer show that it is highly probable that L2 learners will always think most often in their L1, even at the advanced level (Mahmoud, 2006:29). Moreover, translation in the L2 classroom offers a way to highlight similarities and differences between L1 and L2 forms. The translation is useful for L2 acquisition because, firstly, it uses authentic materials, secondly, it is interactive, thirdly, it is learner-centered, and finally it promotes learner autonomy (Mahmoud, 2006:30).

Many researchers support the idea that translation is a motivating activity. Carreres (2006) conducted a questionnaire and came to the conclusion that learners overwhelmingly perceive translation exercises as useful for language learning. Consequently, it was in response to student feedback that he decided to introduce translation more substantially in language classes. He added that translation, by its very nature, is an activity that invites discussion and students are only too happy to contribute to it, often defending their version with remarkable passion and persuasiveness. Also, being a lecturer of English language at university for many years, I have reached the conclusion that using translation during the learning process help students understand and answer the questions that may be asked about the text easily. Another thing, I have observed in the class is that the participation of the students in the lesson is higher compared when the translation does not occur.

As for the point of limiting the use of translation to advanced levels only, Carreres (2006) views translation activities as forming a continuum between the extremes of literal, explicative translation and that of communicative translation as it takes place in the professional world. In the former, translation into L1 is merely a tool--and a very effective one--to help learners grasp a particular L2 structure. As such, stylistic considerations are set aside. In the latter, the focus is on the communicative value of a given text. Learners are then expected to produce a text that could function in the L2 culture. Both approaches, provided they are carefully applied, have their place in the languages classroom and they should be viewed as mutually enhancing rather than exclusive.

The way translation is taught makes a difference. Malmkjaer (1998) argues that translation, if taught in a way that resembles the real life activity of translating, can bring into play the four basic language skills and yield benefits in L2 acquisition. He adds that some recent thinking on language learning has stressed the potential of translation as a means of language learning, if the process is regarded as the development of multi-linguistic competence.

From a local point of view, Shiyab and Abdullateef (2001) consider translation extremely important for foreign language teaching simply because it allows conscious learning and control of the foreign language, and as a result, it reduces native language interference. Using translation can make learning meaningful because the learner is an active participant in the process.

Translation has also been used to teach grammar. In this respect, teachers can show students equivalent and non-equivalent structures between L1 and L2.

Many studies suggested a positive and facilitative role of translation (Newmark 1991; Husain 1994; Kern 1994; Omura 1996). Recent research in pragmatics also suggests that greater awareness of L1 helps in the more effective communicative use of L2. Translation is a means by which both languages can be assessed. Rather than being seen as an obstacle to real language use, translation might more effectively be viewed as a way of fine-tuning the language to be used in given situations and conditions (Owen, 2003).

Liao (2006) summarizes the positive aspects of using translation: (1) it can help students comprehend L2; (2) it can help students to check whether their comprehension is correct; (3) it eases memory constraints in memorizing more words, idioms, grammar, and sentence structures; (4) it can help students develop and express ideas in another language; and (5) it can help reduce learning anxiety and enhance motivation to learn L2.

B. Theoretical Supports of using translation in advanced classes

Firstly, introducing act of translating into SL/FL class promotes positive use of the learners' L1 and knowledge and experience in their SL/FL learning. L1 use in SL/FL learning was banned in the Direct Method, which emphasized SL/FL input and naturalness and fluency in SL/FL. However, it appears that the ban, at the same time, prevented the learners from using their knowledge and previous experience with L1.

In the past, some methods employed cognitive approaches without L1 use (e.g., Suggestopedia: Lozanov, 1982; and Silent Way: Gattegno, 1982). Community Learning (Curran, 1972) allowed counselors' use of L1 to create an optimal learning environment.

When a learner progresses in S/FLA, he/she establishes more direct connections between ideational information (meaning) and the SL/FL word representation (form). Throughout SL/FL acquisition the learner repeatedly encounters new and old lexical forms, and thereby develops more complex connections which include tagged language as well as non-language specific connections.

Language learners naturally translate between L1 and SL/FL constantly (Widdowson, 2003; Cook, 2007). Asking learners to translate in class between their SL/FL and L1 not only embraces this natural tendency but also promotes the act of translating for the learners to learn SL/FL. When the learners translate wrongly or inappropriately, they at least notice the difference existing between languages and they understand that some connections need adjustment. Being advanced learners, they can pay more focused attention to those marked items when they appear in text again (Schmidt, 2001). In other words, instead of working on not making errors in language output each time (as in Audio-lingual pattern practice), act of translating uses errors to its advantage by working at a higher cognitive level - language system level.

Translation activities also offer great opportunities for language learning in terms of focus on form (FonF) theory (e.g., Doughty & Williams, 1998; Long, 1991). This means that translation requires very careful attention to both form and meaning in the source meaning, so that the meaning can be transferred into other forms in another language.

When learners are translating, they can see what makes sense and what doesn't. When their comprehension or productions in SL/FL doesn't make sense to them, they can go into details of the language. For example, they may explore not only words, but sub-word level such as morphology, or beyond words and sentences, and their inquiry may extend to non-linguistic, cultural issues. Thus, translation activities may result in „available input“ in class learning being more effectively converted to intake by learners. For example, translating from L2 to L1, the learner needs to take three steps, a) to comprehend in L2, b) to search for the equivalent expressions in L1, and c) then to synthesize them to recapture the meaning of the original L2 text in L1. This is an ideal situation from a constructivist viewpoint: an authentic, challenging project which calls upon the learner's "experience beyond the classroom, provides rich problem-solving opportunities, and increases interesting communication among the participants, peers and teacher. In addition, act of translating encourages already advanced SL/FL learners to further their reading and writing skills in SL/FL. Once learners reach an advanced level, they comprehend and talk fluently but their reading and writing still lag behind native speakers (e.g., cannot skim as fast as in L1: Taillefer, 1996). Their writing demonstrates mismatched styles and registers (Campbell, 1998), even though there are hardly any overt grammatical errors. Reading activities involving act of translating assist advanced learners to improve their reading and writing skills, since act of translating naturally focuses learners "attention more on a) detailed sentence form and b) discourse structures, and assists learners to develop metalinguistic knowledge/awareness and metacognitive skills.

Thus, translation into another language requires the whole comprehension of the original text first. SL/FL learners are often trained to read SL/FL text using strategies to compensate for the gap between SL/FL and their inter-language systems. The learners usually either read for particular tasks such as answering questions in class (either in L1 or SL/FL), or read in detail limited length semi-authentic text with gloss for learning vocabulary and revising learnt language expressions. These reading exercises involve only classroom learners and the teacher as participants/audience for the activities. However, translation involves an assumed audience outside of the classroom, i.e. monolingual L1 or SL/FL speakers. This context of translation puts „SL/FL reading activities“ in a different perspective.

Translating from L1 to SL/FL (the reversed act of translating) may also promote the learners“ SL/FL acquisition. When asked to translate from L1 to SL/FL, the learners pay closer attention and even analyze the original text in L1, and often seek assistance outside of their own SL/FL resources to fill the gap between the message and their SL/FL competency. They may look up dictionaries to find lexicon, fellow learners to discuss the text, the teacher in class to consult with, or even websites or books to obtain more information about the topic of the text and/or to make up for lack of background knowledge. With this expansion of learning (through interaction with different resources), advanced learners develop their SL/FL further, extending their learning beyond the classroom.

The act of translating is a process filling the gap between the two languages of the learners, namely their L1 and SL/FL. The act of translating between L1 and SL/FL requires the learners to work with two not equally developed languages. To translate between them, the less developed language needs to be developed further to meet the linguistic, cognitive, social and cultural systems of the other fully developed language. Thus, the act of translating demands the learners not only develop their SL/FL linguistic system by learning new lexicon, etc., but also learn non-linguistic conceptual knowledge (e.g., coherence) and more rhetorical structures, and research more subject matter and background knowledge (contextual knowledge). Translating from SL/FL also provides opportunities for the learners to not only „comprehend“ the language (extract messages from the text) but also „experience“ the language used not in a vacuum but in culturally and socially defined situations. In short, act of translating expands SL/FL learning, both through development of the language, metalinguistic awareness and metacognitive skills (planning, monitoring and execution), and study of the culture and society to which the SL/FL belongs. Lastly, the “linguistic, social and cultural sensitivity” acquired through act of translating as part of second language learning can enhance the learners“ noticing and observing details of the linguistic system in L1 and SL/FL. In addition, discovery of similarities and differences in the ways L1 and SL/FL label and analyze the world will educate advanced learners in the role of perspective in meaning and of syntax in conceptualization.

C. Grammar-Translation method to facilitate FLL

The Grammar-Translation method has a supportive role in foreign language learning, and allows students to notice the differences and similarities between L1 and L2 that will make the students understand the language system better.

The purpose of the grammar translation method was to help students read and understand foreign language literature (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). It was an efficient way of learning

vocabulary and grammatical structures. Through focusing on the rules of the grammar of the target language students would recognize the features of two languages that would make language learning easier. A significant role of this method is translating one language into the other. In this method, mastery of the grammatical rules and vocabulary knowledge are emphasized; therefore. It has been hoped that learning is facilitated. In order to communicate accurately, meaningfully, and appropriately skills and practice students' needs are provided using the grammar translation method (Fish, 2003). Reading and writing are the primary skills students develop in this method; moreover, translation activities will supply students with clarity and they will have the opportunity to improve accuracy in the target language. When students can cover form and meaning, their language awareness will raise, and they will enhance their abilities to study independently (Fish, 2003). Vienne (1998) also points out that translation activities will raise awareness not only of the mother tongue and the foreign language, but also of the two cultures. Translation in foreign language learning process promotes understanding. The Grammar-Translation method has been considered useful for students in second language acquisition in that 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, p. 9).

Conclusions

A learner's L1 is an important determinant of Second Language Acquisition. The L1 is a resource which learners use both consciously and subconsciously to help them arrange and re-arrange the L2 data in the input and to perform as best as they can. The cultural features connected with L1 use can be put to good effect when teaching L2. Second language acquisition is a developmental process; L1 can be a contributing factor to it. When integrated into daily classroom activities translation can help students develop and improve reading, speaking, writing skills, grammar and vocabulary.

Translation in foreign language classes enhances better understanding of structures of the two languages and also strengthens students' translation skills. It is an effective, valid tool in the foreign language learning and can be used in the university classroom to improve knowledge in English. Still, translation should not be overused and should be integrated into language teaching at the right time and with the right students. Thus, the act of translating demands the learners not only develop their SL/FL linguistic system by learning new lexicon, etc., but also learn non-linguistic conceptual knowledge and more rhetorical structures, and research more subject matter and background knowledge.

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