

Translation as a Tool for Language Teaching

S Vincent

Translation as an art and as an exercise' used to be one of the topics in the past for English optional students of the Bachelor of Education degree. After translation fell into disgrace along with the Grammar Translation Method, this topic also perhaps disappeared from the syllabus. There is now a possibility for reviving translation as an exercise in the school and college curriculum.

Even during the G-T era, translation was not taught in any systematic manner. However in my fourth form class (equivalent to the present ninth standard) in the early fifties of the last century, my English teacher used to ask us to translate prose pieces into my mother tongue. Perhaps it gave me some insight into the working of English language.

The next experience with translation in my academic work was when Mr Robert Bellarmine and I were asked to frame a syllabus in English for a new course at the Undergraduate level. It was in the early seventies and Wilkins had not come up with his Notional syllabus and we were still practising the structural approach to the letter. We introduced verb patterns and as a strategy for making the students assimilate the structures, we thought, we could have sentences for translation. These sentences would be based on the structures taught.

Later as a votary of Communicative Approach, I had forgotten all about

translation as part of English language teaching. But in recent years as I got immersed in translation work both from English to Tamil and Tamil to English I started wondering whether we could have translation as one of the tools in English language teaching.

A look at the theories about translation may give us some insight into the working of translation as a process or product in which language activity has a primary function. Though there has been translation theory as long as there has been translation, as Peter Prince explains, translation studies is a recent arrival (I.a.1). Dryden's three models of translation, metaphrase, paraphrase and imitation, still hold good and translators even now choose the middle path. Translation Studies as a discipline was perhaps launched by J.S. Holmes in 1972. There have been varied definitions and norms for translation put forth since then and the major concerns are the aspects which will help us in drafting a course of action in having translation as a tool in language teaching.

The important elements in translation, according to some theorists, are language and form, as well as the context in which an utterance/ discourse is made. Yet another aspect for consideration is the cultural milieu of Source Language and the Target Language. These aspects will give us the framework for a translation course in ELT.

When the Direct Method and Structural Approach dislodged Grammar-Translation method, both grammar and translation were together dismissed from the ELT classroom. While grammar has been reappearing in one guise or another (grammar games and grammar focused activities), translation has not been resurrected. Paul Kaye in his article lists the reasons for rejecting grammar and translation. Some of them are: students are engaged in using L1 in the classroom instead of L2 which hinders learning L2, translation activity is not suitable for beginners, translation by itself is difficult as it involves not only language and form but also register, style and idiom, it is difficult to set up a translation activity in the classroom, teachers cannot be proficient both in L1 and L2, it is time consuming and it focuses on only two skills, namely, reading and writing. The article points out the benefits of using translation, quoting many writers including Duffin. Translation has validity and value in the communicative classrooms. Kaye also suggests many activities.

Guy Cook in "OUP English Teaching Blog" remarks on 20 October 2011, "Using translation is surely a natural and obvious means of teaching someone a new language. It has lots of good effects. It can be used to aid learning, practise what has been learned, diagnose problems, and test proficiency. In any case, teachers can't stop student translating – it is such a fundamental basis for language learning."

GuyCook points out other benefits also:

"In addition, it allows learners to relate new

knowledge to existing knowledge (as recommended by many learning theories), promotes noticing and language awareness, and highlights the differences and similarities between the new and existing language."

Mogahed M. Mogahed in his article, "To use or not to use translation in Language Teaching," cites the arguments summed up by Newson and Carareers against using translation as a teaching and testing language tool. He favours using translation as a teaching and testing tool for various reasons. He contends that the problem is not with translation as such but the teaching methodology that separated language from its communicative function. Quoting Titford, he points out that "Learners of foreign language do refer to their mother tongue to aid the process of acquisition of L2, in other words, they 'translate silently'."

Other arguments for translation as a language activity are that it is interesting to the learners and thus is a motivating factor, it can help comprehending L2 text better and it reduces anxiety and stress of the learner and eases the burden of memorizing texts or summaries. The skill of translation not only helps in day to day communication but also has adequate potential for job market. The visual media requires translators for translating subtitles for commercial films and documentaries and advertisements. We need translators for translating literary works and academic texts from English into L2.

All said, the main problem is in devising activities and methodologies for using translation as a tool. Before considering the strategies that can be used in translation, we shall see a few issues that have to be tackled:

1. Teachers of English must not misconstrue that what they are at present doing in the classroom is translation. Most of the teachers of English will swear that they are following Grammar-Translation method as they teach grammar and they translate prose text into mother tongue in the English class. It is an open secret that teachers at the school level and even at the college level read the text aloud, translate the passage into L2 word by word or sentence by sentence and dictate summary. Such teachers must be specially trained in the objectives of using translation as a tool and the technique they have to adopt.

2. Which is better, translation from L2 into L1 or from L1 to L2? If your objective is teaching reading comprehension of the L2 text, L2 will be the source text. If your objective is student's writing skill while translating from L1 to L2, L1 becomes the source text and L2 the target language.

3. When do we begin to give translation exercises? It need not be started in the lower classes. Perhaps the sixth grade is ideal.

4. Which is suitable: single sentences or paragraphs or long narratives? The question itself has graded the types of passages. We can begin with short sentences, possibly as part of an activity in grammar. For instance if you teach present continuous tense

through some communication activities then single meaningful sentences in present continuous tense which do not require any contextualization may be given for translation. Next you can go to short paragraphs. At an advanced level even short stories can be tried. Not only absence of contexts but certain cultural elements also may cause difficulties. For example words like 'uncle', 'aunt' and 'cousin' may have multiple connotations in L1. Likewise there may be words in English for which mother tongue equivalents may not be available. Such words or phrases and even sentence structures must be avoided. As for paragraphs, getting at the sense of the passage and paraphrasing it can be accepted.

Let us now see some of the strategies that can be of use in the classroom for teaching communication skills.

An activity that can promote oral communication has been practised and tested by M. Lawrence. Students work in pairs. One of the pair gives a sentence in L2 and the other translates into L1. After sufficient practice the activity is set as a competitive rapid fire-game. Each pair is given two minutes and sentences are spoken rapidly which are translated. The number of exchanges is scored and the pair that gets the maximum point is rewarded. Sufficient warning must be given in advance so that students do not give culture specific or tricky sentences. Yet another activity will have three participants: one will be a person who knows only L1, another who is a foreigner who knows only L2, and the interpreter who

mediates between the two using L1 and L2.

At the sentence level exercise, meaning and usage of specific words that occur in the sentence may be introduced through various activities which may involve oral work. Students will suggest a number of equivalents in a brainstorm exercise, and all the words will be written on the board. Students may make sentences using them. After this pre-lesson activity students will do the translation. This applies to translation of paragraphs also.

Translation exercise will help to improve the reading skill of the learners. Dagilene Inge writes, "Translation might provide a guided practice in reading. Before starting translating a text, it should be read carefully and analysed in detail to determine the content in terms of what, how and why it is said. So careful text analysis improves students' reading competence and promotes vocabulary development."

After a written translation work is completed, the words used by the students can be put up for oral discussion for appropriateness and accuracy. Two teams work on a passage and after they make their own correction each version is put up for discussion. Alternatively after a passage is translated from L1 to L2 by one team it is retranslated into L1 by another

and both versions are compared with the original.

Translation can be a stimulating and enjoyable exercise for improving communication. Students will definitely enjoy this task as it gives them confidence in handling the second language. Course designers must work on preparing various types of activities using translation as a tool, grade them and give them as packages for use in the English classroom.

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