

The Use of Translation in the EFL Classroom

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Abstract

Translation is an efficient teaching method to facilitate students in the acquisition of foreign languages. Through the process of doing translation, students apply their linguistic knowledge into practical use and raise awareness of the similarities and differences in morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics between the two languages. The incorporation of translation into task-based activities teaches students that translation is not a discrete and useless grammar drill but rather a communicative tool to help them achieve real-life tasks.

Keywords: Translation, EFL classroom

Introduction

The use of the translation method in the EFL classroom is often criticized based on two general arguments. First, translation involving the use of the mother tongue deprives students of opportunities to receive sufficient L2 input. Second, translation triggers L2 learning errors due to negative interference from the mother tongue. EFL teachers are therefore strongly encouraged to abandon the translation method.

While some researchers have advocated the monolingual approach in the EFL classroom, others propose the use of translation as an aid to EFL teaching. In response to the belief that there is

insufficient L2 input when translation is used in the classroom, these researchers question the point of providing sufficient L2 input if it is incomprehensible to learners. In contrast, using translation to assist students in comprehension first then moving on to further learning is more helpful. Regarding negative interference by the mother tongue, supporters of the translation method claim that translation increases students' awareness about both the similarities and differences between the two languages, which thus prevents them from producing utterances that deviate from the target language.

The use of translation in the EFL classroom has also been proven beneficial by a significant number of research studies. By undertaking a clear comparison between the two languages, translation promotes students' acquisition of difficult structures and elements in the target language. In addition, translation facilitates students' quicker comprehension of the target language. Translation also provides an opportunity for students to apply what they have learned by, for example, enabling them to transform their knowledge of vocabulary and sentence structure into real use. Linguistic knowledge, in the translation method, is no longer comprised of discrete pieces of information but is rather a communication tool for them to convey a message or get their meanings across. Overall, translation does not hinder L2 learning at all, but rather assists students to elude the interference of the mother tongue on the first step and then further enhance their L2 learning.

Despite the effectiveness of the translation method in the EFL classroom, it is unfortunate that many teachers still consider it an obstacle to language learning. Translation actually can be used as a cognitive, memory, affective, communicative, and compensatory learning strategy to boost learning effects, on the one hand. On the other hand, it can help develop reading and writing skills. This paper attempts to justify the use of translation in the EFL classroom by first

describing the role of translation in EFL learning, then exploring how translation can be regarded as an effective teaching method to elevate students' language proficiency, and, finally, demonstrating an incorporation of translation into task-based activities.

Review of the Literature

This section seeks to justify the use of translation in the EFL classroom by reviewing the evidence documented in the existing literature. Four issues are addressed. The first defines translation, the second points out the positive effects of translation on foreign language learning, the third explains how translation as a learning strategy facilitates the development of foreign language proficiency, and the fourth shows how translation helps foreign language teaching.

Definition of Translation

Translation is defined by Oxford (1990) as converting the expression of the target language into that of the native language, or the reverse. Another definition of translation, according to Lin (2008), is "expressing the sense of words or text in another language," either from English to Chinese or vice versa in the Taiwanese context. Based on the above two definitions, for EFL learners, translation is a transfer between the first (L1) and the second (L2) language.

The Positive Effect of Translation on Foreign Language Learning

Because translation involves a significant amount of the use of the mother tongue (or L1), some foreign language teachers are concerned that errors might occur because students carry L1 usages over in their efforts to comprehend and express L2. These teachers

believe that the best way for learners to develop native-like language proficiency is to think in that language rather than translate the target language or their mother tongue into the other language. As a result, in order to avoid and eliminate the errors caused by L1 interferences, students are encouraged to suppress the use of translation as a means of learning L2.

However, extensive second language acquisition research studies (e.g. Dulay & Burt, 1973; Johnson & Newport, 1994) have revealed that the difficulties and errors of foreign language learning are not completely attributable to interference by the learners' first language. In an investigation analyzing the sources of errors among native-Spanish-speaking children learning English, Dulay and Burt (1973) found that only 3% of errors came from L1 interferences and 85% of errors were developmental in nature. Developmental errors are those that naturally happen during the process of language learning regardless of learners' L1.

In the area of second-language acquisition research, the role of L1 or translation in foreign language learning has evolved from the earliest refusal to accept its potential to its gaining credit as a viable learning tool. Ellis (1985) claims that foreign language learners consciously or unconsciously refer back to their L1 as a source of knowledge to acquire L2. Likewise, Corder (1981) views L1 as a valuable resource that learners can use during translation to make up for their limitations in learning L2. Based on these studies, learners' L1 has a positive place in their acquisition of L2.

Other researchers, such as Husain (1995), Prince (1996) and Baddeley (1990), regard translation as a facilitator of students' language acquisition. In the opinion of these researchers, once learners can make use of their knowledge of their L1 in L2 learning, the burden of learning L2 may decrease. Stated another way, acquisition of L2 might be facilitated if L1 can be effectively

incorporated into the process of L2 learning.

In addition, Lin (2008) states that translation from L1 to L2 offers learners opportunities to apply what they have learned before—for example, vocabulary and sentence structure—into practical use. Words, phrases, collocations, and grammar points are not at all discrete pieces of information but rather become communicative tools for learners to convey the original writers' meanings. Furthermore, during the process of translating text from Chinese to English, students recognize the means of expression (e.g. vocabulary, sentence structure) needed in order to successfully transmit the original writer's intended meaning. This, in turn, promotes an accumulation of knowledge about how to apply vocabulary and syntax in practical use. Translation is an avenue for facilitating English learning.

Chellappan (1991) also contends that translation raises learners' awareness of the similarities and differences between the two languages. This is in turn facilitative for learners' discovering how to use grammatical structure correctly and vocabulary items appropriately. According to Chellappan, translation does not get in the way of the acquisition of L2 learning but instead helps learners, through contrastive analysis—a systematic comparison between two languages in terms of their morphology, syntax, and semantics—elude negative interferences from L1.

In summary, the basic requirement of learning is to incorporate new knowledge into old (Baddeley, 1990). Translation allows learners to facilitate their L2 learning through utilizing their native L1. For quite a long time, the use of translation has been discouraged if not totally banned in the EFL classroom. With positive evidence of the benefits of translation in L2 learning, it is perhaps time for EFL teachers to take another look at it.

Translation as a Facilitative Learning Strategy in Foreign Language Learning

Learning strategies, according to Oxford (1990), are specific behaviors employed by learners in order to make the process easier, quicker, more pleasant, more active, and more efficient. Oxford divided strategies into two main categories: direct strategies and indirect strategies. Direct strategies refer to those directly related to learning, including memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies. On the other hand, indirect strategies are those that manage learning behaviors, the three subcategories of which are metacognitive, affective, and social strategies.

In terms of direct strategies, learners use memory strategies, such as creating mental linkages and applying images and sounds, to store, index, and retrieve messages from the brain. With cognitive strategies, for example, practicing, analyzing, and creating structure for input and output, learners manipulate or code switch raw data to facilitate comprehension. As for compensation strategies, they are used to comprehend or express a foreign language in order to make up for limited grammar and vocabulary knowledge. Common compensation strategies include guessing and using body language (Oxford, 1990). Regarding indirect strategies, metacognitive strategies are used to plan and monitor learning and evaluate learning efficacy. With affective strategies, learners can lower anxiety resulting from learning by, for example, encouraging themselves or discussing their feelings with someone they trust. Social strategies refer to interaction with others in order to promote learning; these strategies include asking for outside help and cooperating with others (Oxford, 1990).

Translation has usually been identified as one of the cognitive learning strategies (Chamot & Kupper, 1989; Oxford, 1990). Learners receive, process, and transfer the target language based on the mother

tongue. Husain (1995) claims that by using translation, foreign language learners can quickly and efficiently analyze and comprehend the complex structure of the target language.

Other than simply a cognitive strategy, studies have demonstrated that translation is used as a memory, affective, social, and compensation strategy to assist learners to efficiently learn foreign languages via a variety of channels. For example, consider translation as a memory strategy. Liao (2006) and Chern (1993) have pointed out that Taiwanese EFL college students quite often write Chinese translation in the margins of their textbooks to help them remember the meanings of English words and phrases. Although they are discouraged from using translation as a means to learn English by some of their teachers, a majority of students interviewed state that with limited English proficiency, translation is the only effective way for them to acquire vocabulary in L2. The positive effect of translation on the acquisition of L2 vocabulary is also found in Prince's research (1996). He believes that strategic learners can make intelligent use of the repertoire of their L1 skills and translation in order to increase the quantity of words they learn.

In addition, as an affective strategy, translation is able to lower or reduce foreign language learning anxiety. In interviewing adult learners about their use of learning strategies, Wenden (1986) found that the interviewees felt anxious and fearful when speaking English. The strategy they used to calm themselves was to plan what they were about to say in their mother tongue and then expressed their thoughts through translation. They reported that planning their thought in L1 and expressing it in L2 through translation could ease their negative emotions.

In terms of social strategies, learners use their L1 or translation to ask questions or cooperate with others, and this, in turn, promotes their learning outcomes. Cheng (1993) found that Taiwanese EFL

college students cooperatively translated textbooks on technological subjects and discussed their contents based on the translations. In this case, translation functions as scaffolding through which language proficiency is elevated to a further step.

As far as compensation strategies are concerned, translation is used by learners to make up for their insufficient knowledge in L2 in order to get their L2 jobs done. Kobayashi and Rinnert (1992) investigated Japanese college students writing English essays and found that lower-level students resorted to compensation strategies to solve their writing problems. The strategies Japanese college students used included planning and developing thoughts in Japanese and then asking their peers or consulting resource books to translate their Japanese essays into English.

In summary, extensive research studies have demonstrated that translation is a positive and facilitative learning strategy. The role of translation in foreign language learning is multiple; it can be used as a cognitive, memory, affective, social, and compensation strategy to promote learners in the development of reading, writing, and vocabulary.

Translation as an Aid in EFL Teaching

Some EFL teachers don't favor translation in the classroom because in their opinion, translation equals dull vocabulary memorization and grammar drills, which are futile in terms of improving students' communicative competence. In the traditional translation method, students usually memorize discrete words with their corresponding translation, comprehend L2 grammar with their L1 knowledge, and do translation at the sentence level. However, translation as a teaching technique or activity goes far beyond vocabulary memorization and grammar drills. Rather, translation can

be used as a communicative tool to help learners get their message across to people of other languages. In fact, many researchers (e.g. Tudor, 1987; Titford, 1985, Husain, 1994) suggest the incorporation of translation into communicative language teaching to result in more effective learning. They believe that translation can be the optimum post-communicative activity to consolidate the language skills learners have previously acquired.

Husain (1994) pinpoints three principles when incorporating translation into communicative language teaching. First, the teacher has to offer students opportunities to do translation in contexts, rather than in discrete sentences. Lin (2008) recommends consecutive translation; that is, the whole text should be divided into consecutive and related sentence units. This ensures that single sentences will not be too heavy of a burden for students in terms of processing the language. Consecutive and related sentences also provide students with a complete text. Second, translation material to be must be authentic and meet student needs, avoiding obsolete and extremely difficult subject matter and structure. Last and not least important, translation is used to increase students' awareness in recognizing the similarities and differences between two languages.

Translation is not the final goal of foreign language learning, but it can be a useful learning tool, by which students can grasp grammar, acquire vocabulary, comprehend text, and develop listening and speaking skills. Zohrevandi (1982) once described a communication activity integrated with translation. In this activity, students were divided into groups, and each group was assigned words and phrases in their L1. The students then had to complete a short English dialogue by using the given words and phrases in L1. Following that, each group engaged in a role-play of their dialogue, and the group that performed the best received an award. In addition, students were asked to analyze their dialogue in terms of semantics, syntax, and

pragmatics. Other communicative activities recommended by Zohrevandi include having students translate movies into English or having students act out movies in English. These activities incorporated with translation develop students' four skills in reading, listening, speaking, and writing, and the fifth skill, i. e., translation, as well.

Levenston (1985) likewise regards translation as an efficient teaching and evaluation tool in communicative language teaching. He suggested teachers use interpretations in role-play activities. For instance, a student played a foreign visitor. He went to a department store and had a communication breakdown with a sales clerk there. At this time, another student came as an interpreter to give help. These situations can be extended to other contexts, such as post offices, banks, restaurants, airports, and so on. In these authentic situations, translation serves a communicative purpose rather than as static grammar drills out of context.

Not only has positive evidence for incorporating translation into foreign language teaching been obtained in overseas countries, but beneficial results have appeared in a Taiwanese EFL context. In Hsieh's (2000) vocabulary and reading class, she asked groups of students to translate the English text into Chinese, and then orally reported how they translated specific vocabulary items and syntactic structures. By the end of the course, questionnaires reveal students' positive response to translation employed in teaching, and the post-test showed students' improvement in English reading comprehension, reading strategies, vocabulary quantity, and cultural knowledge.

Additionally, Chan (2000) has stated that parallel reading between the original text and the translated version is an effective teaching method. In Chan's view, when students have difficulties comprehending the original text, the translated version is a better

resource than dictionaries to assist students' comprehension of the text. She has further suggested using English versions of famous Chinese literary works to teach advanced EFL students, letting students learn how to use English to express Chinese cultural contents. Meanwhile, while reading the English version, students might even recognize some points they overlook when reading the Chinese version.

Departing from the contrastive analysis between Chinese and English, Huang (2003) revealed that cross translation can strengthen students' awareness of English idiomatic expressions. Huang asked students to translate the Chinese portion of Chinese/English dual language storybooks into English, and then to compare their English version with the book's. By conscious comparison between their English version and the book's English version, students can notice the differences in both semantics and syntax. The 'Chinese English' translation problem is likely to be eliminated through a systematic contrastive analysis between the two languages.

Another researcher, Liao (2002), has also observed that when English is the only medium allowed in discussions, students are quiet due to nervousness or lack of English competence. In contrast, when both Chinese and English are allowed as media for discussions, the atmosphere gets heated. Students immediately offer help when their peers are unable to make themselves understood in English. Generally speaking, there is more participation and meaningful communication sustains longer when both Chinese and English can be used in class discussions.

Evidence, both domestically and abroad, has demonstrated that properly designed translation activities can enhance the four skills. The use of translation is a natural tendency for L2 learners, so the total eradication of its function is not so convincing. Translation should develop its highest function if it can be integrated with

communicative language teaching. EFL teachers can design meaningful tasks such as having students do English dubbing for TV programs or having students act as interpreters in simulated real-life situations. All these activities can provide students with a different view of translation; they won't find translation boring but interesting and practical in these communication-oriented translation activities.

A Design of Task-based Translation Method

While decontextualized translation teaching should play a minimal role in the classroom, translation itself, 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. Therefore, Gonzalez Davies (2004) has proposed a combination of the task-based approach and translation method. In her view, the task-based approach appears to lend itself particularly well to the use of translation in language teaching. The focus of the task-based approach is on using language for communicative purposes. Similarly, translation pedagogy in the literature emphasizes the need to present translation as a communicative activity.

In the task-based approach, students need to complete a task, which requires them to process language pragmatically. A task is intended to result in language use that bears a resemblance, direct or indirect, to the way language is used in the real world. Like other language activities, a task can engage productive or receptive and oral or written skills, and also various cognitive processes.

Nunan (2004) provides a three-phase model for developing a task-based lesson: the pre-task, during-task, and post-task phase. The purpose of the pre-task phase is to prepare students to perform the task. During the pre-task phase, teachers introduce the topic, set the context for the task, and teach key vocabulary and phrases needed

to carry out the task. The pre-task phase functions as a scaffolding that builds up and consolidates students' language skills.

Moving on to the during-task phase, students are instilled with grammatical knowledge, which is different from the traditional approach, in which the presentation of grammatical knowledge always occurs in the first phase. The linguistic part is postponed because it is easier for students to understand abstract grammatical concepts after hearing, seeing, and speaking the target language within a communicative context. After being given form-focused instruction, students are introduced to and presented the classroom task itself. The task should integrate the knowledge gained and the language skills practiced in the previous steps. For example, if students have been instructed on the topic of finding a B&B and given a significant amount of language practice in this area, the classroom task can be to ask students to go on the internet, choose a suitable B&B after considering prices, services, and locations, and, finally, interpret the information from English to Chinese for their fellow classmates, who pretend to be their non-English-speaking friends who want to join them on a trip.

Finally, in the post-task phase, students are encouraged to reflect on how the task is performed, such as any good points to keep and any bad points to eliminate. Also, they are encouraged to pay attention to form, in particular, to those forms that proved problematic to the students when they performed the task. Through consciousness-raising tasks, production practice activities, and analytical activities, students will be more likely to become aware of their weak points and improve those weak points through reinforcement activities.

A task-based translation method regards translation not as an isolated language element, but as an integrative skill necessary to help students to complete an assigned task. The following is a

demonstration of a task-based translation method for college students at the beginner level. The lesson plan describes the procedures in the pre-task, during-task, and post-task phases.

Where do we go for our graduation trip?

The motivation behind designing this task is that in Taiwan, college students usually go on a trip (the “graduation trip”) as a whole class before they graduate. Choosing a destination for the graduation trip and persuading peers to agree on that destination may be an activity that will motivate students because they will have to complete a real-life task with the language they are learning.

Pre-task phase. During the pre-task phase, the teacher introduces the task, telling students they must choose a destination for the graduation trip and present it in terms of its scenic spots and prices to the class. During the presentation, the students have to state why they chose this particular place and try their best to persuade their peers to agree with them. After each presentation, the students vote for their favorite graduation trip destination. The student who receives the most votes will be rewarded with extra credit.

Because lower-level students are less likely to write something in English to introduce a place, here we can ask students to browse the internet for a Chinese article to act as a model for describing the place they wish to go on their graduation trip. Rather than asking students to translate the whole text into English, which might be beyond their ability, the teacher can ask the students to underline 10 sentences they think best describes the features of the places. After the students have marked 10 sentences that they feel offer the best descriptions, ask the students to write a first draft of the

Chinese-to-English translation. During this time, the teacher circulates the classroom to offer assistance to students on words and phrases they do not know in L2. At the end of the class, the teacher collects students' drafts and revises them. The revision of students' writing helps the teacher recognize what grammar points must be explicitly instructed and what vocabulary items must be supplemented.

During-task phase. The teacher explicitly instructs grammar points that students require for the task but in which they are not yet proficient. Students are then asked to complete some practice exercises for reinforcement. After that, students check their revised writing for this task and ask questions if they are not clear about the revisions. As stated previously, grammar points are not introduced in the beginning. The introduction of these points is postponed until after the students have written their articles in the target language. The reason for this is that after students experiment with the language, they will notice their grammatical problems and it will be easier for them to understand the grammatical concepts.

Once the language problem has been addressed, students are given time to prepare their presentations. The teacher can suggest that students prepare PowerPoint files to make their presentation clearer, more interesting, and more inviting. After students have prepared, they take turns presenting their favorite destinations for the graduation trip. During the presentations, students are given a sheet to answer. On this sheet, the teacher asks students some questions, such as "Where is the presenter's favorite graduation trip destination?" and "Give two reasons why the presenter has chosen this place." The purpose of this sheet is for the teacher to assess whether the students understand their peers' English presentations. The students can answer the sheet either in Chinese or in English.

After students finish their presentations, they vote for their favorite graduation trip destination. Also ask students to talk about why they voted for a particular student either in Chinese or in English. Do not force beginner students to express their ideas in English; their English proficiency may not be adequate to express what they mean.

Post-task phase. This phase consolidates what students have previously learned. The teacher asks students to reflect on their presentations, paying particular attention to the errors they made. Students should also be given a variety of practice exercises to strengthen their proficiency levels. A model can be demonstrated to students so that they will have greater clarity regarding what they can do to improve their proficiency.

In this phase, follow-up listening activities can be incorporated with translation. For instance, the teacher can play a recording or show a video about a scenic spot and ask students to interpret two or three key points. Following that, related vocabulary or important points of grammar can be taught to expand students' linguistic knowledge.

A reading activity can be also given as a follow-up activity. Students are given an article about traveling abroad. Each group can be assigned a paragraph to translate to the whole class. During a verbal translation of the passage, students can recognize which parts require improvement. After the teacher gives modeling and guidance, it will be easier for them to learn something in which their abilities are lacking.

A combination of translation with a real-life task offers students an opportunity to use the language. Through translation, students are more likely to notice the differences between the two languages, and this is facilitative in their development of foreign language

proficiency.

Conclusion

EFL learners have a natural tendency to use translation. Rather than simply attempting to ban students from using this latent language processing, EFL teachers should help their students to take advantage of their already existing L1 to facilitate the learning of L2.

Extensive research studies have revealed that translation is not only an efficient learning tool but also a useful teaching method if translation activities are well designed. On the one hand, students use translation to facilitate their comprehension process and to reduce insecurity that arises from limited language proficiency. On the other hand, teachers use translation to consolidate what students have learned about the English language, such as vocabulary, sentence structures, and cultural aspects.

Integrating translation into task-based activities is a new direction for EFL teachers to consider in the classroom. Translation does not actually equal the instruction of discrete words, phrases, and grammar out of context. Rather, translation can be incorporated into task-based communicative activities in which students can use it as a medium to accomplish tasks, such as translating material about Chinese winter solstice customs and orally presenting it to exchange students from foreign universities.

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