
THE ROLE OF TRANSLATION IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

Since the days of the Grammar and Translation Method (GTM), the use of translation as a teaching tool has been rejected on the grounds that the interference of the mother tongue would damage the learning of a foreign language (FL). As a result, MGT was abandoned, and various methods were created that preached intensive use of the foreign language, some of which are still used nowadays. Even so, scholars in the field have tried to use translation to incorporate it into the main methods of Foreign Language Teaching without having to replace them or go back to what MGT was. It was concluded, among other things, that the problem with mother-tongue interference is not the translation itself but the way in which this tool is used in the classroom. Given the problem mentioned above, this paper aims to clarify the fundamental role of translation in Foreign Language Teaching.

Keywords: Translation. Teaching. Foreign Language. Method.

1. INTRODUCTION

When language teaching gained ground in a world that was beginning to globalize, researchers began to study the best way to teach other languages. The Grammar and Translation Method (GTM) marked the initial phase in language instruction methodologies. Nevertheless, it encountered criticism due to several deficiencies, such as the absence of authenticity, the mechanical application of both languages and the dearth of engagement in communicative tasks. The following approaches departed from reliance on translation, contending that the pervasive influence of the native language proved consistently detrimental.

Since then, as a result of a kind of trauma suffered with GTM, the use of translation when teaching any foreign language is almost always seen as wrong. With the advent of linguistic sciences, which vehemently criticize the Grammar and Translation Method, theorists have come to say that translation is neither pedagogical nor communicative. Even proponents of the Communicative Approach, which allows a limited role for translation, approach the prospect of employing their native language to facilitate the learning of another with caution.

Although it is difficult to argue against those who believe that translation is not a valuable tool to be used in teaching a foreign language, researchers from all over the world have carried out various studies that show how advantageous the use of translation can be, what are the best times to use it in the classroom and how the teacher can take advantage of the use of the mother tongue in a dynamic way and search of learning.

In order to write this paper, it was necessary to briefly analyze the methods used from the 19th century to the present day. In addition, an analysis was made of what translation theory says about using translation in foreign language classes. Finally, the advantages of using translation and the different modalities that can be used were presented.

2. MODERN METHODS OF TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND TRANSLATION

Since the 19th century, humanity has devised various ways of teaching a foreign language. The first of these dealt with translations. In the Grammar and Translation Method, students were required to translate several texts, be they literary or otherwise, often with a religious context. The primary emphasis of the lesson was on understanding grammar rules and committing vocabulary to memory. GTM linked and subordinated translation to grammar and no longer to text, culture, and literature. Consequently, translation evolved into a lifeless, sterile activity detached from the authentic language use in the real world (RIDDD, 2000)

This method persisted for numerous years; even today, some schools continue to employ it for foreign language instruction. However, the Grammar and Translation Method (GTM) is criticized for its artificial nature. According to Brown (2007), GTM does not contribute to the enhancement of students' communicative proficiency.

After the Grammar and Translation Method, scholars created methods that did not use translation as a tool. In fact, speaking the mother tongue (L1) in the classroom was forbidden. The Direct Method emphasized oral and listening skills, arguing that in order to master the other skills, the student had to be entirely in contact with the second language. Thus, from the earliest levels, native teachers were preferred, translation was forbidden, and any influence from the mother tongue was considered harmful.

In the 1950s, the Audiolingual Method emerged as a new way of teaching a foreign language. There was the backdrop of war where the countries involved needed as many people speaking as many languages as possible to have teachers, translators, and interpreters. It was based on Bloomfield's structuralism and Skinner's behaviorism and used the repetition of sentences (drills) aimed at the learner's automatism. This method did not employ translation as its designers believed that interference from the native language (L1) could have detrimental effects. They argued that even through repetition, the learner should only speak the target language because this would condition them to internalize the language they were learning.

The latest and currently predominant method for teaching foreign languages is the Communicative Approach. This approach emphasizes effective communication, fostering the simultaneous development of the four language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing. While translation occupies a slightly more significant role within this method, its “negative reputation” stemming from the Grammar and Translation Method (GTM) era results in many teachers casting a skeptical eye on its utilization.

As evident from the discussion, apart from GTM, the other mentioned methods have explored approaches to teaching foreign languages that do not rely on translation. Nevertheless, a prevalent scenario unfolds: despite the teacher's efforts to maintain a clear distinction between L1 and L2 in distinct settings, students often resort to comprehension attempts using bilingual dictionaries or relying on a peer's translation. Moreover, involuntary translation occurs subconsciously in students' minds, even as teachers emphasize ‘thinking in a foreign language’ as the paramount rule. Ridd (2007) illustrates that, despite students reaching an advanced level of proficiency, mental translation processes can still be detected in their language writing, often without their awareness. According to the author, applied linguists made a significant error in assuming that involuntary translation could be eliminated by forbidding the use of the native language and discouraging conscious translation practice in the classroom. Despite efforts to encourage “thinking in the foreign language,” involuntary translation persists in the background, contrary to the student's intentions.

In this regard, it proves intriguing to reconsider the incorporation of translation in the classroom to enhance foreign language learning. The goal is not to elevate it as a primary element in the teaching format but to acknowledge its auxiliary function. Translation becomes a valuable tool when employed organically, addressing the specific needs of the students. For instance, learners in the initial stages may find translation beneficial due to their limited vocabulary in the target language (L2). At more advanced levels, it is a valuable tool for acquiring lexical and grammatical knowledge. When appropriately employed, translation emerges as an effective means of maintaining a continual awareness of distinctions in the foreign language and culture.

3. THE USE OF TRANSLATION IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

The methodologies for teaching a foreign language have been a longstanding subject of intense debate, with discussions revolving around the most effective approaches for teaching and learning another language. Initially, debates centered on determining the most effective method or approach, as evidenced in section 2. In contemporary discussions, the focus has shifted toward evaluating the authenticity of activities employed by teachers in the classroom. There is a prevailing emphasis on prioritizing the authentic use of the foreign language in situations that closely mirror real-life scenarios. Throughout these discussions, the role of translation in foreign language teaching has consistently been viewed negatively, perceived as detrimental to the process of learning another language.

García-Medall (2001) outlines the primary arguments against the incorporation of translation into foreign language education, asserting that detractors argue that translation primarily targets reading and writing skills, lacks interactive oral components, fails to foster original content creation by students, and historically has been implemented in an ad hoc manner. Additionally, translation has been traditionally linked with literary and scientific texts, which may not adequately address students' communicative requirements.

It is a misconception to perceive translation merely as a reading and writing exercise. Such a narrow view arises when translation is employed in a manner akin to the Grammar and Translation Method (GTM), which, upon its inception, overly fixated on the language's structure to the detriment of its meaning. Nevertheless, translation can effectively encompass all four language skills when utilized in the context of fostering communication. This includes reading, translating, writing, drafting, editing, re-editing, and incorporating oral negotiation of meaning, both between the teacher and the student and among the students themselves.

Stoddart (2011) suggests that translation holds significant potential as a classroom exercise, particularly in monolingual settings, where it can be customized to emphasize practicality, learner-centricity, and procedural aspects. He posits that translation serves as an effective method for highlighting linguistic, semantic, and pragmatic elements of the target language.

In the case of GTM, the issue did not lie inherently with translation but rather in how it was implemented in the classroom. Its application was such that the primary learning objective was never communication; instead, it focused on transposing one language into another solely for the purpose of vocabulary acquisition. In contrast to the approach suggested by MGT, it is conceivable to leverage translation to fulfill the objectives of communication and foreign language instruction. According to Pegenaut (1996), translation offers a wide array of educational opportunities, including instruction on translation techniques, enhancement of proficiency in both foreign and native languages, intellectual development, and improvement in reading comprehension by requiring students to engage in attentive reading.

Additionally, Visintin (2011) emphasizes the natural inclination of students to seek lexical equivalents in their native language, highlighting the importance of utilizing this instinctive

process for more profound language exploration and cognitive development. This exploration facilitates the formation of linguistic automatisms that facilitate bilingual communication.

Moreover, incorporating translation activities into language classes extends beyond simple task instructions, evolving into meaningful language discussions. Such integration enhances students' understanding of meaning and form, thereby improving writing skills across both languages and promoting adequate reading comprehension at all proficiency levels.

Agra (2011) underscores that translation is not merely about associating words with their dictionary meanings but involves culturally constructed meanings and subjective interpretations. Thus, translation should be embraced to overcome linguistic and cultural barriers encountered in language learning, offering learners extensive access to diverse information and fostering a deeper understanding of both the target and native languages. Additionally, incorporating comparative analysis between languages is crucial for students to maintain a connection with their reality and appreciate its significance in their learning journey.

4. TRANSLATION MODALITIES FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

When in a foreign language classroom, the teacher often has the chance to choose which activities he or she will use and which resources such activities will require. This chance may not always be observed regarding the use of translation as a teaching resource. Two types of translation can be used in the foreign language classroom: internalized (involuntary) translation and pedagogical translation, which in turn is divided into explanatory translation and translation exercises, which can also be divided into oral or written activities.

Internalized or involuntary translation happens without conscious awareness and distinguishes itself from deliberate translation methods because it operates beyond the monitor's control, being only indirectly observable (RIDD, 2007). Every learner of a foreign language engages in this type of translation, which becomes inevitable during the initial stages as learners tend to rely on their native language. Lucindo (2011), when discussing Casado & Guerrero's studies (1993), suggests that teachers can prevent the incorrect use of this strategy. This helps students avoid establishing unproductive, one-to-one equivalences between the language being learned (L2) and their native language (L1). Instead, they should replace them with functional and pragmatic equivalences, where the communicative context determines the meaning of a term. This process is crucial for learning because involuntary translation and the use of the native language provide support in the mental construction of the foreign language.

In this translation modality, the teacher cannot control the use of the native language because it simply happens. Thus, when the teacher accepts the existence of this modality of translation and no longer demands that his students 'think in the foreign language', at any level they are, his role becomes to help the student translate meanings and not just words, that is, the teacher starts helping them to be trained to interpret more than to translate statements.

In contrast, pedagogical translation denotes its utilization within the educational environment through a variety of instructional methods, including exercises and explanations, with the primary objective of facilitating the acquisition of a foreign language. It can be described as an exercise or didactic activity primarily focused on enhancing proficiency in the target language through techniques such as text manipulation, comparative analysis, and deliberate reflection (HERNANDEZ, 1998). This modality can occur both from the foreign language to the native language (direct translation) and from the native language to the foreign language (reverse translation).

It differs from professional translation by objectives, conditions, and execution processes. While the pedagogical one aims to teach a foreign language, the professional one aims to fulfill a contract or even communicate, through another language, what was said in a particular text

to a particular audience. Furthermore, the execution process of pedagogical translation is inserted in the classroom context, where it occurs with some tranquility since the final goal is to verify the students' comprehension. Pedagogical translation is divided into two forms of application: explanatory translation and resolution of translation exercises.

Explanatory translation entails precise rendering of language elements, typically carried out by the instructor to expedite comprehension of complex concepts or when verbal explanations and gestures prove ineffective. The instructor assumes the role of a translator within the classroom setting, yet with didactic intentions, emphasizing language acquisition rather than contractual obligations. As Ridd (2007) articulated, the explanatory mode encompasses translations primarily conducted by the instructor (and occasionally by students discerning their peer's struggle with the foreign language explanation or the instructor's ineffectual miming), aimed at elucidating specific words or phrases. It represents a form of code-switching or selective reliance on the native tongue. In this context, students play a passive role, resulting in limited assimilation of the provided information for the sake of expediency or comprehension facilitation.

When done in direct translation mode (FL - NL), this modality of translation should be done sporadically, and in order not to be just a resource that makes the teacher's life easier, it is always essential to build a context and never to use isolated words or phrases. It is a crucial resource when explaining false friends, ambiguities, some abstract nouns, interesting uses of a particular word in both the native and target languages, instructions, and statements.

However, there is also the possibility of using explanatory translation in reverse, that is, translating from the native to the foreign languages. An example that is widely encouraged by foreign language schools, in general, are posters spread throughout classrooms containing the following question: "How do you say _____ in _____?" where the first space is replaced by the word in the native language, and the second by the language into which the word should be translated, such as:

"How can I say 'paredo' in English?"

In addition to explanatory translation, pedagogical translation also includes the so-called translation exercises that contribute to a conscious learning of the FL, allow students to expand their vocabulary, and provide a more balanced view of the FL culture, including criticism. Such exercises include direct or reverse translation examples and oral or written translation exercises.

In direct or reverse translation, the focus is on the initial or final point of the languages used. In the first one, it is translated from the Foreign Language to the Native Language, and in the other, the opposite is done, from the Native Language to the Foreign Language. Direct translation is always considered simpler than reverse translation because, supposedly, students have more skill with their own language.

There are different types of translation exercises. Pegenaut (1996), for example, suggests the use of dialogues and dictations that have already been used at some point in the classroom. Garcia-Medall (2001) lists Garcez's (1996) approach, namely, utilizing parallel texts in both the native language (L1) and the target language (L2), although not identical, with shared thematic content, such as informative, instructional, or descriptive material. Numerous other exercises are devised regularly, but they must offer both linguistic appeal, enabling the surmounting of language barriers, exploration of linguistic idiosyncrasies in each language, and extralinguistic interest, exposing students to diverse text types and highlighting linguistic variances across them. In the view of Lucindo (2011), the advantages of translation exercises

extend beyond mere text comprehension. When employed purposefully, these activities foster a deliberate understanding of the target language, facilitate the enrichment of students' vocabulary, and, as posited by Ridd (2007), encourage a more nuanced and critical perspective of the target language culture, thereby averting the tendency to oversimplify foreign cultures.

The modality of translation exercises can be divided between oral and written translations. The first one is a direct and effective way to explain the meaning of words when it is impossible to do so otherwise. It also serves to assess students' deficiencies that would otherwise go unnoticed. This translation can also contribute to the exercise of the students' interpreter capacity of the L2.

Lucindo (2011) underscores the pivotal role of the instructor in such translational endeavors, as it is incumbent upon them to design the activities, foster deliberations among translations, and rectify them as needed.

The written modality is a valuable technique to verify the student's writing competence. It may be necessary to test their understanding of vocabulary, syntax, idiomatic expressions, and using different registers. A fascinating writing exercise is examining several translations and comparing them with each other, substantiating their choices.

When utilized effectively, diverse translation modalities significantly enhance the educational process by tapping into students' pre-existing knowledge. Hinojosa and Lima (2011) assert that foreign language terms, akin to cultural symbols, necessitate a cultivated consciousness, emphasizing that the comprehension of these terms relies on their contextualization within familiar historical and cultural frameworks presented to FL learners.

Translation tasks may be conducted orally or in writing at the instructor's discretion. While the exercises employed for oral translation may overlap with those designated for written translation, oral translation activities afford learners the opportunity to enhance their auditory and verbal proficiency contingent upon the language employed for translation. If the native language is utilized, emphasis is placed on honing listening skills; conversely, if the foreign language is employed, the focus shifts to developing speaking abilities. Both modalities of translation exercises, when used together, blend the four skills dynamically, thus constituting a communicative activity.

In summary, translation is one of the most appropriate ways to know the structure of a text and its use, as well as an effective means to unveil the limitations and characteristics of the native and foreign linguistic code. We can finally consider translation as a fifth skill, in addition to oral and written comprehension and production.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Since the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM), there has been a search to recognize translation as a tool for teaching foreign languages. The GTM failed to use it effectively, focusing solely on vocabulary rather than teaching the foreign language itself. Since then, teachers and applied linguists have been reluctant to use translation despite its potential as a valuable aid in foreign language teaching.

Nevertheless, contrary to the majority, who insist on excluding the native language from the classroom, efforts have emerged to integrate the most commonly used methods with translation rather than replace them with the GTM.

Foreign Language teachers and Applied Linguistics theorists need to reconsider translation as an essential strategy to aid in learning another language, whether through translation exercises or by relying on so-called involuntary translation. Regardless of the teacher's choice, ending the prejudice against using translation in foreign language teaching is crucial. Studies

mentioned in this paper have already proven that it can be a valuable teaching tool when used carefully and always aiming for communicative competence.

Such studies are crucial as they demonstrate that the problem with native language interference lies not in the translation itself but in how it is used in the classroom: if it is used dynamically, aiming for communicative ability rather than just vocabulary acquisition, as was the case with the GTM.

Translation should not be the guiding focus of the teaching and learning process. However, it can be a well-used resource that yields good results without compromising the cultural and identity characteristics of the student. The goal is for the student to appreciate the richness found in cultural differences and language, making learning meaningful in their lives.

Therefore, teachers must acknowledge the existence of involuntary translation and use it without imposing that the student should think in the foreign language from the very first moment in the classroom. Applied linguists need to conduct more research on the benefits of translation in foreign language learning, as only then will the barriers of prejudice be overcome and new techniques, possibly better than existing ones, be created.

When this happens, there is an excellent chance that the attitudes of teachers and applied linguists will change from complete denial to reluctant acceptance and, ultimately, to employing translation in the best possible way in their classes to help their learners master the foreign language.

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