

# STROKOVNI ČLANKI

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## Crossing the Border

On the use of translation in language learning

### Prestop meje

O uporabi prevajanja pri učenju jezika

*V skoraj 20-letni praksi kot prevajalec in pisec literature za učenje angleščine kot tujega jezika je avtor spoznal, da se pri poučevanju tujih jezikov premalo uporablja prevajanje. Kot vzroke za odpor do uporabe prevajanja v te namene navaja: tradicijo, da je prevajanje bolj povezano s preverjanjem znanja kot pa s poučevanjem jezika; prepričanje, da je prevajanje na splošno vezano na pisano besedilo in se ne šteje kot komunikativna dejavnost; da je zelo zamudno; da se s prevajanjem jezika večidel lotevamo nesistematično in učenci ne vedo, česa se pri tem učijo; in končno, da se pri poučevanju tujega jezika odločno premalo uporablja materin jezik, pri prevajanju pa brez njega ne gre.*

*Avtor nato predlaga, kako bi lahko odstranili ali omilili navedene vzroke in s tem pri učenju tujih jezikov omogočili uporabo prevajanja kot izrazito naravne jezikovne dejavnosti. Nato postreže z mnogimi primeri, iz katerih je razvidno, da utegne biti uporaba prevajanja pogosto zelo smotrna in učinkovita metoda pri poučevanju tujih jezikov.*

*Translation, as the process of conveying messages across linguistic and cultural barriers, is an eminently communicative activity, one whose use could well be considered in a wider range of teaching situations than may currently be the case.*

(Dr. Ian Tudor, in *ELT Journal*)

## I. Some theoretical questions

However persuasive the arguments in favour of translation may be, we must acknowledge that it is still not widely used in language learning. This natural and necessary activity is either ignored in the language programme, or else grundgingly given a little space.

On the whole, translation is regarded (except by specialist departments) as a nuisance, an activity which goes on "outside".

Since it cannot be taken for granted that translation has a rightful place in the language teaching programme, let us look briefly at the reasons for this resistance.

## Why is translation not more widely used?

The chief reasons, I suggest, are the following:

- Translation is traditionally associated with language testing rather than with language teaching.

The emphasis is on error detection and correction: translation reveals what the student does not know. The focus is negative. Marks are deducted for mistakes, but rarely given for intelligent solutions or "**trouvailles**". The language is corrected, not taught.

- Translation is regarded as text-bound, confined to reading and writing. Discussion, if any, is limited to points of detail (mainly vocabulary). It is not a "communicative activity".
- Translation is time-consuming. If the work is done in class, and in writing, could not the students' time be better used? If it is done out of class, could not the teacher's time - spent on correction - be better used?

Translation is associated with "difficult" texts, often literary, and full of language traps. The students spend precious time tussling with a language they do not "need" (thème et version). The language of translation seems to bear little relation to the language of "real life".

- Translation activities have no clear focus. They involve a random approach to language. There is no coherence. The problems raised by one text may have no bearing on those raised by another. The students do not know what they are learning, and their progress - if any - cannot be discerned.
- And, finally, translation involves use of the mother tongue. This, in many institutions, is inadmissible, and even where it is permitted it is not always encouraged. (Students come to language classes to learn a foreign language, not to practise the mother tongue!)

## What translation has to offer

The objections raised above are all valid. But underlying them is the implication that the mother-tongue has no proper role in language learning. In fact, the mother-tongue is often regarded as a gatecrasher at what should be a cosy (monolingual) language party, hosted by the L2. But the guests all speak another lan-

guage, the mother-tongue, the L1 of the world "outside".

If we are to use translation successfully in language teaching, we must accept - not ignore - the importance of the mother-tongue.

Not all foreign language learners become teachers. Many become doctors, engineers, sales representatives, journalists, and ... translators. Their work demands the ability to work easily and speedily from one language to the other. They are constantly crossing the border from the foreign language (L2) to the mother-tongue (L1).

Of all language learning activities, translation can best teach us how to cross these borders.

Before outlining ways in which translation might effectively be used in language learning, I should like to look back at some of the points already raised.

## Discussion

**Teaching or testing?** The value of translation as a testing device is proportionate to the amount of time spent on the practice of translation. Like any other skill, translation requires practice<sup>3</sup>. If no practice is given, translation should not be used - or be used only sparingly - as a testing device.

If translation **is** used for testing, the texts should not contain arbitrary (lexical) traps, and the marking should **not be based solely on errors**. Invention should also be rewarded.

**Time.** There is no purpose in using translation if it is merely a sporadic activity. It must either be regularly used, or not used at all.

Time-wastage in translation classes can be reduced: a) by switching the emphasis from written to oral translation, b) by using short texts (2-3 sentences) with a clear language focus, e.g. -ing-forms, if-clauses, phrasal verbs, etc. c) by "sharing the load", ie. by dividing up longer texts into manageable segments (up to 5 sentences) and asking the students to work in groups of three on just one segment. This last approach has several advantages: it combines written and oral work; it allows the students time to grapple with part of a complete text; it ensures that all are ac-

tively engaged at the same time; and finally - because the load is being shared - it turns what would have been a chore into a challenge.

**Communication.** It is sometimes argued that, because translation is so closely associated with writing and the printed page, it must be a "non-communicative" activity. This is true only if the translation is done in writing and in isolation. But it is possible to devise activities which involve both writing and speaking, and which encourage the exchange of ideas.

Translation is **not** - as some may think it is - a matter of finding the "right" solution. It is, rather, a matter of weighing up several plausible solutions and selecting the best among them. In this process of selection, the more suggestions that are offered, the more likely one is to reach consensus as to which are the best. This involves discussion, therefore communication. I should also add that many of the most satisfactory translations are arrived at **after** the students have "rubbed off" their ideas on one another, picking up fresh thoughts on the way, and gradually modifying and improving their original suggestions.

As an example, let me quote two short passages from an activity in which the focus is on the use of **make**:

- i) Mrs. Thatcher has succeeded in making **people believe** in her economic "miracle", which as we have repeatedly argued, is largely an illusion.
- ii) Although Miss Quested **had not made herself popular** with the English, she brought out all that was fine in their character.

For students translating these sentences, the first proved relatively easy, as a convenient verb already existed in the mother tongue for "make ... believe" (uvjer(i)ti). The second, however, presented a greater challenge, partly because no suitable equivalent for "popular" could be found in the mother tongue. They had no difficulty in understanding either sentence, the problem was to convey the meaning of the second. And this leads me to the next point.

**Difficulty.** With regard to difficulty, materials used for translation differ notably from other language learning materials in that a text which is "easy" to understand is often "hard" to translate. The reverse may also be true. For instance, an expression such as: "You're dead right", which is not hard to understand, might not be easy to translate. (**T'as raison(?), Absolument! (?), Lá je suis bien d'accord (?)** etc.) While a sentence which may appear difficult because of its length and complexity, may in fact be easy to translate: "Detailed calculations find that the acceleration of an object under gravity depends on both the mass and temperature of an object in a way that makes heavier, or cooler objects fall faster than lighter or hotter ones."

One of the great merits of translation as a language learning activity is that it can allow students to take a fresh look at **familiar** language. Translation need not imply long minutes spent poring over the dictionary. Indeed, in many of the activities I shall shortly be outlining, no dictionaries would be required (though they could, of course, be used).

One of the main aims of using translation in the language class is to encourage flexibility in the students, to make them more open to the options offered by both languages. This aim cannot be achieved if the material offered is over-complex or, simply, untranslatable.

**Language focus.** If you run a race, you expect there to be, somewhere, a starting-point and a finishing-line. Without these, the race is not a race, merely an uncoordinated run.

In most language-teaching activities, the starting-points and finishing lines are clearly defined (at least in the text-books). There may be room for discussion, improvisation, but generally the students know where they are going and what they are doing (practising the present perfect, polishing up their prepositions, etc.).

In translation, alas, there is often no sense of direction. The text is tossed to the students

with a dismissive: "Translate this, then hand it in!" This is not good enough. The students should know why they are working on the material.

Although it is not difficult to find suitable material to illustrate points of language (L1 and L2) through translation, there are unfortunately few practical text-books of translation which are designed specifically for classroom use. As a result, the teacher may have to devise his or her own materials, and this is time-consuming.

Until suitable materials are produced, designed specifically for language learners, translation will remain a marginal activity in foreign language learning.

**Use of the mother-tongue.** If a particular institution feels that the mother-tongue should not be used in foreign language learning then, clearly, there can be no translation.

If the mother-tongue is allowed, certain hidden benefits may emerge. One of these is a sense of ease and relaxation. If students are not obliged to pretend that they do not have a mother-tongue, they often open out more readily in the foreign language. When the mother-tongue is admitted, the foreign language seems less threatening.

An experiment I carried out recently in Austria helped to confirm this view. The theme of the seminar was not translation, but literature. The working language was English, not German. Towards the end of the course, I decided to try out an activity using both languages.

The stimulus was a well-known text, Shakespeare's sonnet "Shall I compare Thee to a Summer's Day?" (The text had been on display for several days, but I had not drawn attention to it, and no questions were asked.) The instructions for the activity were: 1. Imagine that an international conference is being held in this village (Raach). What is the title of your imagined conference? 2. The mayor of Raach (who speaks no English) will give his welcoming speech in German, but he

would like to include an English quotation ... In pairs, write the speech (5 sentences in German) and include any words from the Shakespeare sonnet.

When this was done, I told the participants that one person in each pair should deliver the speech (in German), and the other should give an on-the-spot translation in English. The results were excellent. Partly, because the situation was clear and plausible, partly because the material was generated in the mother-tongue, and partly because - in the transfer to English - the situation allowed for lapses in accuracy, and a certain "stretching" of the written text.

In my work with professional translators, I have used similar approaches with comparable results (e.g. write the opening paragraph of a speech by the manager/director of your firm, welcoming a foreign visitor. Provide an off-the-cuff translation.) These, and similar experiences have reaffirmed my belief in the value of combining written with oral translation.

To conclude this section on a general note, I should like to stress that translation is an eminently **natural language activity** - far more natural, indeed, than many of the so-called communicative activities dreamt up by text-book writers. Surely an activity which goes on all around us **outside** the classroom - in banks, shops, airports, offices - deserves attention **inside** the language class?

## II. Some practical approaches

In this section, I should like to touch on some of the many ways in which language can be approached through translation, and to offer a sample of the activities.

### Context and register

Language is coloured by context. As soon as we see the words "Depress the button ..." or "J'accuse réception de ..." we associate them almost automatically with the context of an instruction manual or a business letter, respectively. Similarly, if we hear the words "scattered

thundershowers", we think instinctively of a weather report. (It would be hard to imagine two old villagers discussing the weather and speaking of the "likelihood of scattered thundershowers" - though it is not, of course, impossible.)

As an introductory activity, offer the students a selection of language fragments such as these, and ask the class - as a single group - to suggest contexts from which the fragments might be drawn. And, if possible, to complete the wording.

A few more examples:

#### English

- . Light refreshments ...
- . Scattered thundershowers ...
- . Keep well out of reach of ...
- . ... took a hammering from ...

#### French

- . Ne pas consommer après ...
- . ... mais il reste toujours à voir si ...
- . ... ont constaté une légère amélioration ..
- . Je vous prie de bien vouloir ...

The purpose of the activity is not to find the "right" answer, but to suggest a plausible context. Once the students have offered their suggestions, the full source is revealed, e.g. In the finals of the Basketball Championship, Canada **took a hammering from** Cuba: 71 - 106.

**Note.** This is not just a warming-up activity. It helps to draw students' attention to the close link (in both languages) between language and context. (A link which is sometimes ignored in EFL textbooks.) All fragments should be drawn from authentic sources, and the students should be given the full context at the end of the activity.

#### Source language influence

Although the mother tongue exerts an undoubted influence over language learners, little attention is paid to its effect in most (British) EFL materials. Perhaps because it is tacitly assumed that this is a matter best dealt with by the individual teacher. Perhaps, too, because the focus in most EFL works is exclusively on

English. But the influence of the mother tongue cannot be removed simply by being ignored.

Translation, because it involves the use of **both** languages, reveals most effectively the influence of one upon the other. I have in mind not just differences of vocabulary, or "faux amis", but also the more elusive questions such as those of word order, register, stress, choice of structures, etc. It is these factors - the "invisible influences" - which often distort our use of the foreign language. And it is translation which can best make us aware of their effect. Consider these three examples:

In 1950, domicile-work trips **represented** more than 80% of RATP traffic. At the present time, this percentage is about 50%. By the year 2000 it will probably - - - about 40%.

- a) have descended to
- b) have dropped to
- c) be as low as.

The research and development institute, and the design and production departments - - - the most modern computers of Hewlett Packard make.

- a) are provided with
- b) have
- c) are equipped with

Mostar has a Mediterranean climate with long warm summers and mild winters. - - - Mostar has practically no dead tourist season, and attracts visitors throughout the year.

- a) As a result
- b) Thanks to its climate
- c) Due to these ideal climatic conditions.

Whichever wording one chooses for the gaps, each of these sentences would be "grammatically" correct. But grammatical correctness is not all. There is a difference between a translated sentence which doggedly follows the source language and one which is thought through in the target language. The first example was translated from French. The expression the translator used was a) "have descended to". (aura probablement baissé/ descendu jusqu' à ...?). Both b) and c) would be preferable in English.

In the second example, translated from Slovene, the translator used a) "are provided with", a formulation which comes directly from the source language. Yet b) or c) would have been more appropriate. In the third example, translated from Serbo-Croatian, we again see source language influence. in the translator's choice: c) Due to these ideal climatic conditions. Here, the register is too formal for the context.

These are aspects of language which, though difficult to teach, need to be learnt. In my opinion, they are best learnt through translation.

Translation can also help to make students aware of those differences between languages which may not emerge when the focus is exclusively on the foreign language (L2). Words and expressions, for instance, which can be understood without the help of the dictionary, yet which can often not be translated even with the help of the dictionary.

Peter Newmark gives a typical example:<sup>(5)</sup>

**Retenir** like **assurer** is one of those maddening words that have too many meanings, and the dictionaries fail to stress the most typical ones, which I think are: "accept", "consider" and "take into account" (a proposal, an argument, a project).

### "Everyday words"

For the language learner, some of the most useful translation activities are those which test the potential of common words and expressions. Suitable material is not hard to find. In all languages there are certain operative words and expressions which will occur on almost any page. Words such as: **get**, **go**, **make**, **take**, **put** ... (or, **avoir**, **tenir**, **mettre**, **trouver**, **obtenir**, etc.)

In the translation class, the students work on a range of material drawn from different sources, but with a common focus. For instance, the use of **get** or **go** in English:

### RABIES CAN KILL!

Rabies is a serious hazard all over the world.  
**You can get it** if you are bitten ... by an infected dog. If you're bitten while abroad:  
**Get medical attention fast.** **Go** to the nearest hospital. You may need rabies vaccination.

### BEFORE YOU GO ABROAD

**Get your doctor's advice**, if you have any illness. But you can only get a small **supply of medication** under the NHS for use while you are away.

... It may be difficult and expensive to **get treatment where you are going.**

(Brochure, Department of Health and Social Security)

"I must fly," cried Sally. "I'm about two hours late already!"

"**Got a new boyfriend?**" But Sally ignored my grin.

"**I've got to see a man on business,**" she said briefly.

"When shall we meet again?"

"I'll have to see, darling. **I've got such a lot on** ... I'll let you know. **I may be going to**

**Frankfurt quite soon.**

"**Have you got a job there?**"

"No. Not exactly".

(from Christopher Isherwood, Goodbye to Berlin)

These two passages show that material from different sources can usefully be combined in translation.

(While in English one can **get**: a job, a new boyfriend, medical attention, doctor's advice, or even rabies, in French the verbs needed would probably be: **trouver**, **chercher**, **consulter**, **attraper** ... but not **obtenir**.)

### Notions and functions

Translation can serve a useful role in language reinforcement. Particularly in areas with which the students are familiar, but not adept. One of these areas is that of functions, eg. ways of expressing **obligation**, **possibility/capability**, **necessity**, **cause and effect**, **intention**, etc.<sup>(4)</sup>

Since this topic is dealt with in some detail in **Translation**<sup>(2)</sup>, I shall add here only two remarks. Firstly, in looking for suitable material, it helps to think first of the **context** in which a particular function or expression is likely to occur. For instance, medical and scientific reports abound in the language of cause and effect, while expressions of condition or possibility (if-clauses) can readily be found in contracts, regulations, and instruction manuals.

Secondly, in selecting examples one should keep an eye open for "disguised" expressions, i.e. words or phrases which might be rendered by different structures in the target language. The three sentences below, for instance, are all expressions of condition/possibility, but in the third the **if (si)** is disguised as **En caso de ...**

. **Si detecta la existencia** de una fuga de gas, cierre la llave de paso general de la instalacion de gas ...

. **Si no puede contactar** con la Empresa Instaladora, llame al Servicio de Urgencia de la Compania.

. **En caso de detectar fuga de gas** en un aparato, cierre la llave de paso del mismo ...  
(GAS, Consejos e Información, Catalana de Gas)

Just in passing I should like to add that, although material such as this may seem "dry" to some language teachers, it is generally well received by the students. This may be because the context is clear, the sentences are relatively short, and there is some purpose to the translation exercise. (If you had an English guest staying with you, you might actually need to explain what the booklet says!). One can also work on such material in two ways - orally and in writing - with one group of students giving an off-the-cuff spoken interpretation, and the other a more considered written version of the text.

**Idiomatic language;** colloquialisms, cultural differences

Idiomatic language is a nail made of soft metal: when you hammer it, it bends. In foreign language usage idioms are often hammered when they should be gently tapped:

. David Oistrakh, one of the world's **ace violinists**, ... His repertoire includes the **cream** of violin concertos.

(Record sleeve, translated from Russian)

. At the same time zenith and beginning of a prodigious culture, his work **makes up the keystone** of our musical history.

(A la fois sommet et point de départ d'une culture prodigieuse, son oeuvre forme la clef de voûte de notre histoire musicale.)

(Muridor record sleeve, translated from French.)

. The nightspots here - discothèques, coffee houses and snack bars - are open **far into wee hours**, drawing many night owls.

(Guide to Tokyo)

In each case, the idiom is out of place: ace violinist (a mismatch: **ace** is reserved mainly for sportsmen); the cream of violin concertos (unintended cliché); makes up the keystone (wrong verb: **is** the keystone); far into wee hours (wrong quotation: the **wee small hours**), drawing many night owls (slightly dated, second-hand expression - perhaps dug out of the dictionary?)

In a foreign language, idioms and colloquialisms are notoriously difficult to handle correctly. Yet students do need to have at least a passive understanding of them. Translation will immediately reveal whether an idiom or colloquialism can be naturally transferred to the target language, or whether it is being forced upon it.

Where idioms are concerned, languages rarely match on a one-to-one basis. Even a simple colloquial expression, such as **to make it**, may have no suitable L1 equivalent:

. People come to Bombay to "make it", not be idle. Consequently, there are thousands in marginal occupations.

If there is no L1 equivalent for "to make it", a synonym must be used, eg. "to succeed".

I would not claim that translation can teach students how to use idiomatic language correctly, but it can help them to cope more adequately with idioms when they arise.

With regard to English (as a foreign language), this is an area in which much useful work can be done on, for instance, phrasal and prepositional verbs.

## Conclusion

The ideas outlined above have germinated slowly. For nearly twenty years, I worked both as a translator and as a writer of EFL materials. But there was, alas, little opportunity to bring these two worlds together. Translation and language learning were treated as worlds apart. It is only in the last five years that some border-crossing points have been opened. This opening-up has certainly been accelerated by the recent, and welcome, changes in Eastern Europe. Political changes have brought changes in language.

One of the important effects of these changes - now that much of the jargon has gone - will be to reaffirm the vitality of what formerly existed only as "underground" languages (Hungarian, Czech, Polish, etc.).

By the year 1992, talented translators will be in great demand. But they will not be found if language teaching programmes continue to focus on the foreign language at the expense of the mother tongue. It may be true that few language students will become professional translators, but it is also true that most, in their professional lives, will use translation. Should they not be given some practice?

Translation can be an effective tool in language teaching, but only if it is properly used: for teaching, rather than testing.

## References

- 1 Dr Ian Tudor, in "ELT Journal", October 1987.
- 2 See: Alan Duff, **Translation**, Oxford University Press: Resource Books for Teachers, 1989
- 3 See: Peter Newmark, "Paragraphs on Translation - 5", in **The Linguist**, 1/1990. "Unless it is exceedingly complex, grammar is not usually a major problem in translation."
- 4 Alan Duff, **Translation**, op. cit.
- 5 See: Peter Newmark, "Paragraphs on Translation - 5", op. cit.