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Translation and Foreign Language Reading Comprehension: A Neglected Didactic Procedure

Throughout decades of foreign language (L2) teaching, a recurring issue has been the role of the first language (L1) in the classroom. A long-term and wide-ranging debate persists regarding practical and theoretical questions about the significance of the L1's obvious influence on the L2 being learned. Although many feel that the L1 should not be used in the classroom, other researchers, teachers, and learners do see a role for the L1 and support its use as a communication strategy and instructional tool (Fung, Wilkinson, and Moore 2003; Mahmoud 1996, 1998; Mukattash 2003; Schweers 1999; Sheen 2001; Stibbard 1998; Tang 2002). This article will look at the historical background of this topic, and describe how the L1 is currently being used in the L2 classroom, including in written translation activities. A specific explanation will be given about the benefits of using translation for assessing reading comprehension, one of which is the collection of language items for test development.

Historical use of the L1 in L2 instruction

For more than a century, most approaches to L2 instruction recognized the L1's role in L2 language pedagogy, but most methods dictated that it should be prohibited in the classroom. Only the Grammar Translation Method of the early 20th century fully embraced the use of the L1 in the L2 classroom; in addition to the intense study of vocabulary and grammatical rules, this method required the laborious translation of L2 texts into the L1. Eventually, this method was challenged for doing "virtually nothing to enhance a student's communicative ability in the language" (Brown 2000, 16). Subsequent methods that appeared around the mid-20th century obligated the near total use of the L2 to teach the L2, including the influential Audiolingual Method, which took its cue from behaviorism and treated L1 interference errors (also called *negative language transfer*) as bad habits that were to be eradicated though drills, memorization, and a

strict limitation on the use of the L1. The procedure of *contrastive analysis* was employed to identify the L1 structures that interfered with L2 production so that errors could be eliminated through practice (Brown 2000).

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, new approaches to language learning also considered the use of the L1 as undesirable. When cognitive psychology theorized that people acquire their L2 in a manner similar to the way they acquired their L1 as a child, new approaches were developed that proposed an L2 learning environment replete with social and communicative aspects of language use. The L1 was rarely used in these methods.

Language learners and interlanguage

As research continued, the contrastive analysis position offered more sophisticated descriptions of the connections between the L1 and the L2 and what it meant for language learners developing their communication skills (Corder 1983; Gass and Selinker 2001; Ringbom 1992; Seliger 1988). Studies indicated that in addition to negative language transfer, positive transfer between the L1 and L2 was also important, suggesting that L2 learners could benefit from being exposed to the structural similarities of both languages. Research also showed that aspects of the L2 itself could explain many errors, such as when a learner overgeneralizes L2 forms, a regular process that happens with most developing English speakers when they apply a regular conjugation to an irregular verb (e.g., "He goed").

These research results softened the absolute contrastive analysis position and led to a broader study of error analysis. At this point even *avoidance errors* were described; these are errors a learner makes when avoiding a difficult L2 sound, word, or grammatical feature, thereby masking a lack of proficiency (James 1998). A new term—*interlanguage*—was coined to define the complex developing system of the learners' L2 that was influenced by positive and negative transfer from the L1, in conjunction with their developing knowledge of the L2 itself (Brown 2000).

An eclectic approach

By the end of the 1980s, teachers began to borrow elements from various methods to develop an eclectic approach to language learning. Many of these elements come together in Communicative Language Teaching, an approach that incorporates effective L2 communication, meaningful activities, and high motivation achieved through attention to learners' needs and preferences.

In this context, the effort to minimize the role of the L1 in language learning by Dulay and Burt (1977), Krashen (1982), and others is now being questioned. Many teachers recognize that the L1 in the classroom is a positive representation of interlanguage; additionally, they know it is often a student preference because the natural desire to communicate impels learners to use their L1 to fill in gaps in communication, a strategy that successfully moves their acquisition of the L2 forward. Nevertheless, many in the language teaching community still have reservations about using the L1 in the L2 classroom, objecting to it on the grounds that it limits exposure to the target language, and keeps students thinking in their L1. However, as the data on interlanguage and language transfer show, it is highly probable that L2 learners will always think most often in their L1, even at the advanced level (Owen 2003).

Today the taboo against using the L1 in the classroom is breaking down, as it is recognized that some learners use the L1 as a communication strategy to successfully learn and use the L2 (James 1998; Odlin 1989).

Current use of the L1 in the L2 classroom

L2 pedagogy has advanced beyond the days when students were passive participants and teachers the sole directors of the language learning process. Teaching methods today consider materials and activities that are relevant to students and take their needs and learning styles into account in order to achieve higher motivation. Therefore, regarding the use of the L1 in the L2 classroom, it is important to find out how students themselves feel about it. Schweers (1999) conducted research into this question and found that most students from three English classes felt that the L1 should be used in the classroom, while all 19 of the teachers reported using the L1 in class on limited occasions. Both students and teachers chose "Explaining difficult concepts" as the main reason to use the L1 (Schweers 1999, 8). Other instances when the use of the L1 may be useful include (1) explaining the meanings of unfamiliar words and expressions, (2) clearing

up difficult grammatical issues, (3) teaching pronunciation, (4) explaining reading strategies, and (5) giving instructions for tasks. These examples reveal the L1's potential to strengthen L2 acquisition by making it more meaningful and communicative. For example, a definition of a word or an explanation of a task that is given in the L1 might be more effective than an L2 definition or explanation, reducing the waste of precious class time and ensuring that everyone understands, especially lower-level students.

Periodically, a problem arises when a student is not able to formulate an answer in the L2. To solve this problem, Nuttall (1982, 131) suggests that teachers should accept answers in the L1, and he asks: "Why should we not accept responses in the language that will most clearly show us whether they [the students] have understood or where their problems lie?" In my own classes, I have observed many cases of code-switching when I asked students to give short answers orally, and I have also observed that students performed better when they were asked to use their L1 to summarize an L2 text. Because so many learners successfully use the L1 to circumvent communication breakdowns, "we would do well to remember that the first language can be a facilitating factor and not just an interfering factor" (Brown 2000, 68).

Translation in the L2 classroom

A special classroom use of the L1 is the translation of L2 texts into the L1, a procedure that has been neglected, possibly because of its association with the old Grammar Translation Method (Owen 2003; Tuck 1998). However, current research reveals that today's translation activities have little to do with the previous method, which occurred in a non-interactive teacher-centered classroom with few activities aside from the translation of difficult, non-relevant, and often boring texts (Bonyadi 2003; Owen 2003; Tuck 1998).

According to Van Els et al. (1984), indicating the lack of correspondence between L1 and L2 forms can enhance understanding of the language being learned. It is a natural linguistic phenomenon for a learner to display positive and negative language transfer of the L1 through interlanguage, and translation offers one way to highlight these similarities and differences.

Translation can also be used as a productive means to learn new L2 vocabulary. And translation can draw the teacher's attention to the words and structures that need to be practiced (Van Els et al. 1984). For something different, Tuck (2003) proposes the use of *L1 to L2* translation as a guided writing exercise for beginners, using process approach activities such as writing practice, dictionary work, and peer-correction opportunities.

There are many other activities to use with translation that successfully raise consciousness about the L2 (Bonyadi 2003; Owen 2003). As with other theoretically sound methods, the following principles support the use of translation for L2 acquisition:

- Translation uses *authentic materials*. Students respond to relevant materials from the real world, and with translation teachers have an opportunity to select the most appropriate types of texts.
- Translation is *interactive*. Translation does not have to be a solitary activity. It can promote communication through classroom discussions with the teacher and among students through group work and peer correction.
- Translation is *learner-centered*. The learner-centered classroom is essential to effective teaching (Mahmoud 1992, 2000). Motivated students have input into the selection of materials and the design of activities. The teacher allows for questions and feedback as students negotiate the meaning of language.
- Translation promotes *learner autonomy*. Translation can motivate students as they gain an understanding of the intricacies of the L2, including different communication and learning strategies. They also discover their own learning styles and become adept at using dictionaries and electronic resources. All of this instills confidence in their own abilities and, most importantly, provides them with skills they can use outside of the classroom.

For these reasons and more, translation is now considered an acceptable procedure for the Communicative Approach to language teaching (Bonyadi 2003).

The purpose of post-reading activities

Post-reading activities give students the opportunity to review, summarize, and react to a reading passage, and activities such as debates, role-plays, games, and discussions take place in small and large groups, as well as with the entire class.

Some post-reading exercises also assess how well the students have comprehended the reading material, and they often consist of a text followed by questions that check the comprehension of specific details, main ideas, and inferences. The following techniques are often used for this purpose:

1. A *multiple-choice* question is a statement or question usually followed by four options, of which only one option—the *key*—is correct; the remaining three options are called *distractors*. Quality multiple-choice questions are difficult to construct because to properly assess comprehension, the three distractors must be plausible, and double keys or options that are too easy must be avoided.

2. A t*rue/false* question contains a statement that learners mark as either true or false. True/false items are less difficult to construct, but they need to be balanced with other types of items since a student has a 50 percent chance of guessing the correct response.

3. A *short answer question* requires the learner to produce a brief response to a question, usually ranging from one word to a couple of sentences. Short answer items are also fairly easy to construct; however, a student's incorrect answers may be attributable to the complex language of questions that add an additional comprehension problem.

4. *Summary writing* requires the students to express in writing a text's main ideas and conclusion in a specified number of words or paragraphs. Depending on the level, this task can be difficult for students, especially if they have to write in their L2.

Translation as a post-reading procedure

A particular way to use translation is as a post-reading procedure to evaluate students' comprehension of a text. By its very nature, translation offers many opportunities to emphasize the specific details and main ideas of a translated text, especially those that may not have been correctly understood by students. Below are some advantages of translation as a post-reading task.

Translation covers all textual elements

When translating a text, students come into contact with all the main ideas and specific details of a reading passage. Translation necessitates the close reading of the entire passage, which provides valuable information for the instructor. Translation can improve comprehension since it encourages the students to read a passage carefully and precisely at the word, sentence, and text levels (Van Els et al. 1984). Therefore, the final product informs the teacher as to which lexical items, structures, and ideas are problematic. Unacceptable renditions also give clues to particular features of interlanguage that may be at work.

The analysis of results can be extended to language use and textual organization, both of which are important in language learning (Uzawa 1996). Language style and pragmatics can be studied as well. Appropriately designed tasks for different ages and proficiency levels can help learners become familiar with different features of literary, scientific, and technical texts.

Translation does not require production in the L2

Comprehension questions should, by definition, focus on the skill they purport to assess: reading comprehension. At beginning levels, techniques such as multiple-choice and true/false questions are good tasks to assess reading comprehension because they do not require oral production of responses in the L2. Nuttall (1982) even suggests that multiple-choice and true/false questions be given in the L1, as he feels that the "inability to express themselves in the FL needlessly limits the kinds of response students give, and the quality of the response too" (131).

It is also possible that short answers and written summaries in the L2 can lead to production problems and therefore not accurately assess a student's actual reading comprehension. This is why some researchers advocate the use of L1 even when responding to short-answer questions (Hughes 2003; Nuttall 1982).

As Hughes (2003) describes it, testing techniques "should not add a significantly difficult

task on top of reading. This is one reason for being wary of requiring candidates to write answers, particularly in the language of the text" (143). These problems are avoided in translation, which does not require production in the L2. Students display their understanding of the L2 text by responding in the L1, which is an excellent measure of their understanding of the L2 text on many levels, including vocabulary, specific details, main ideas, and textual organization.

Translation provides a data source for other testing techniques

Another benefit from translation is that it can provide the teacher with a pool of incorrect words, phrases, and sentences for multiple-choice distractors, true/false incorrect statements, and short answer questions. When creating distractors for multiple-choice questions and incorrect options for true/false items, the test developer often resorts to guesswork in determining what might be misunderstood in a reading. In the case of translation, the incorrect understanding of the language and ideas in the text is clear and obvious, providing sources for distractors that come from the students themselves.

With a supply of incorrectly translated words, phrases, and sentences, teachers do not need to resort to testing spelling and punctuation, or eye-tricks and invalid items that tap language skills other than comprehension. Because there are a variety of possible translations for any text, students will come up with many different translations of the same sentence.

Example of a translation task

The following task illustrates how translation can provide resources and material for other comprehension exercises. The data was gathered from a group of third semester Arabic-speaking university students majoring in English who translated a text of 15 sentences from English into Arabic as a post-reading task. Their incorrect translations revealed misunderstandings of certain words, phrases, and sentences.

One of these English sentences was: "Both of these involve close contact with the general public." This sentence elicited the following ten incorrect renderings in Arabic (which are backtranslated into English):

1. Both of them join the main road.
2. Both of them touch the general government.
3. Both of them require a strong relationship with people.
4. Both of them have contact with the public transport.
5. Both of them are connected to the main roads.
6. Both of them are related to the public places.
7. Both of them require a communication network with people.
8. Both of them involve close friction in general.
9. Both of them require closed communication with the nation.
10. Both of them lead to closure of communication with people.

A useful place to start in error analysis is to categorize the translation problems as local errors, which minimally interfere with comprehension, and global errors, which strongly interfere with comprehension (Brown 2000). For example, translating *involve* from the original sentence into *require* in sentences 3, 7, and 9 is an example of a local error. In contrast, translating *close contact* from the original sentence into *close friction* in sentence 8 and *closed communication* in sentence 9 are examples of global errors.

It is easy to imagine the lively discussion the errors in this one sentence might engender. Students would be intrigued at the effect that secondary meanings and distortions have on the text. In addition to class discussions and group activities, there are fruitful opportunities for demonstrations on how to use dictionaries, synonym finders, and other resources.

A teacher could use the data from the translation exercise to select words (that were translated incorrectly) to discuss with a new class during pre-reading exercises to see if it advances their comprehension; to construct multiple-choice and true/false items to be used for a post-reading assessment for a different class; and to use the items to test achievement with the same class after subsequent instruction.

Important guidelines for using translation

The following guidelines are important for teachers who plan to use translation in the classroom:

- *Understand that multilingual classrooms are not ideal.* Translation is most feasible when the whole class speaks the same language. In a multilingual classroom with many different native languages, the teacher may have a case for not using translation. Owen (2003) suggests several activities for this situation, which include grouping language families together for translation exercises and group discussion and conducting post-translation discussions in the L2 about the similarities and differences of various languages.
- *Plan for revision.* Students will often make mistakes when writing in their L1, and to be sure it is an L1 mistake, it is imperative that they revise their translations carefully to give them the chance to correct any mistakes that are not actually attributable to comprehension problems.
- *Learn error analysis.* As is clear from the study of interlanguage, errors can derive from negative language transfer, the L2, avoidance, and other sources. Since there is a risk of misidentifying errors, teachers should become familiar with the field.
- *Limit error correction.* Too much concentration on errors may have a negative effect on learners' motivation. Teachers must remember to acknowledge what students get correct.
- *Use translation judiciously.* Translation should be just one part of a teacher's methodological repertoire. For reading comprehension assessment, translation should be combined with multiple-choice, true/false, short answer, and other test techniques. Other reading strategies should also be included, especially scanning a text for specific details and skimming for main ideas, which are essential skills for students who will study overseas, where they will be "expected to read extensively in very limited periods of time" (Hughes 2003, 138).
- *Give positive backwash.* It is essential to strive for positive backwash in all testing, which occurs when students are given appropriate and well-explained tasks for their age, level, and interests, and when they are able to use the testing results to increase their understanding of the target language (Hughes 2003). Reading

comprehension questions, regardless of their type, should be carefully developed and used for teaching as well as testing. Therefore, the teacher should go beyond focusing on the correct answer and call attention to "the way language is used to convey meaning, and of the strategies he can use to recover meaning from the text" (Nuttall 1982, 127).

Conclusion

L2 learners customarily rely on their L1, especially in acquisition-poor environments where exposure to the L2 is confined to a few hours per week of formal classroom instruction. For many teachers and students, the use of L1 is a learning and communication strategy that can be used in the classroom for various purposes, such as to explain difficult concepts. I support L2 to L1 written translation in particular not only because of its benefits as a post-reading task, but also because the incorrect translations can be back-translated into the L2 and used as a source of information to be fed into other testing techniques. Translation is also useful because it draws the students' attention to the entire reading passage at the word, sentence, and text level. Because translation does not require students to respond in the L2, it focuses on comprehension, the skill it purports to develop.

Although correcting students' translations is time-consuming, the task is worth doing because translation gives a representation of the students' comprehension ability and interlanguage development. If texts are selected carefully so that the difficulty levels are appropriate for the target age and language level, if the procedure is used in moderation and with other techniques, and if attention is given to positive backwash and the development of autonomy, translation takes its place alongside other theoretically sound methods of language teaching. More research on translation is definitely needed, but after decades of neglect in L2 teaching, translation is, in Bonyadi's (2003) words, "back from Siberia."

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