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Back Translating: An Integrated Approach to Focus Learners' Attention on Their L2 Knowledge Gaps

Reading is an important channel for students to receive second language (L2) input, but unmindful or distracted reading offers little to L2 acquisition, which helps to explain why learners often complain about their minimal progress after taking extensive reading courses. It is generally believed that L2 acquisition is impossible without focused attention on target language forms, since "people learn about the things that they pay attention to and do not learn much about the things they do not attend to" (Schmidt 2010, 721). Thus, strategies to help learners consciously notice target language forms are of high importance in L2 reading instruction. Importantly, this noticing strategy also applies to the other skills; for instance, properly designed writing activities help learners notice what meanings they cannot accurately convey in English, and this negative feedback prompts them to return to the original reading material to find the related forms in context, thereby paving the way for L2 acquisition.

Because of the notable shortcomings of teaching listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills separately, English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) researchers and practitioners regularly explore techniques to integrate the four skills into lesson plans. For example, Zhang (2009) discusses four activities that integrate the teaching of reading and speaking, focusing on how reading enhances learners' speaking ability.

In this article, we will continue to discuss the integration of language skills in classroom teaching by focusing on *back translating*—translating an English text into the student's first language (L1) and then back into English. After discussing theoretical rationale, we will suggest ways to incorporate back-translating writing

exercises into reading classes as a beneficial method to focus learners' attention on the gaps in their English competence.

Input: The importance of attention and negotiation for meaning

According to Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis, an essential factor for language acquisition is input that is comprehensible but that also contains language structures beyond the learner's current proficiency level; in addition, he claims that "the input hypothesis has been successfully applied in the area of reading" (Krashen 2003). However, there is some debate about whether comprehensible input alone will necessarily trigger the process of L2 acquisition; as pointed out by Saville-Troike (2006, 74), input "is not available for processing unless learners actually notice it: i.e. pay attention to it."

Schmidt (2001, 3) sees attention as a vital means to comprehend L2 acquisition, including "the ways in which interaction, negotiation for meaning, and all forms of instruction contribute to language learning." Indeed, it is possible to claim that there is no L2 acquisition without attention. In explaining the Interaction Hypothesis, Long (1996) states that "selective attention and the learner's developing L2 processing capacity" are "brought together most usefully, although not exclusively, during negotiation for meaning" (414). In other words, when interlocutors or readers make efforts to overcome communication barriers by negotiating meaning, they receive both additional input and valuable feedback that they pay attention to. The result is *intake*—new language structures that become integrated into the learner's developing language system.

According to Johnson (2004, 54), this "negotiation for meaning provides the opportunity for negative feedback," which "draws the learner's attention to the target language's linguistic structures" and "may lead the learner to noticing the gap in his or her linguistic competence and to converting the incoming input into intake." In Johnson's model, negotiation for meaning plays the role of an independent mediator between the learner's external and internal environments and makes it possible for learners to realize their internal needs and then look for solutions in their external environments.

To more clearly demonstrate the role of negotiation for meaning, we designed a model to illustrate the prominent role played by attention to new language forms. (See Figure 1.)

As the dotted line indicates, new language forms from the input do not interact directly with the learner's present L2 capacity. That is to say, new language forms do not directly enter a learner's L2 inventory and then enhance his or her present L2 capacity. Learners notice these new forms only when negotiation-for-meaning activities make them a focus of conscious or subconscious attention.

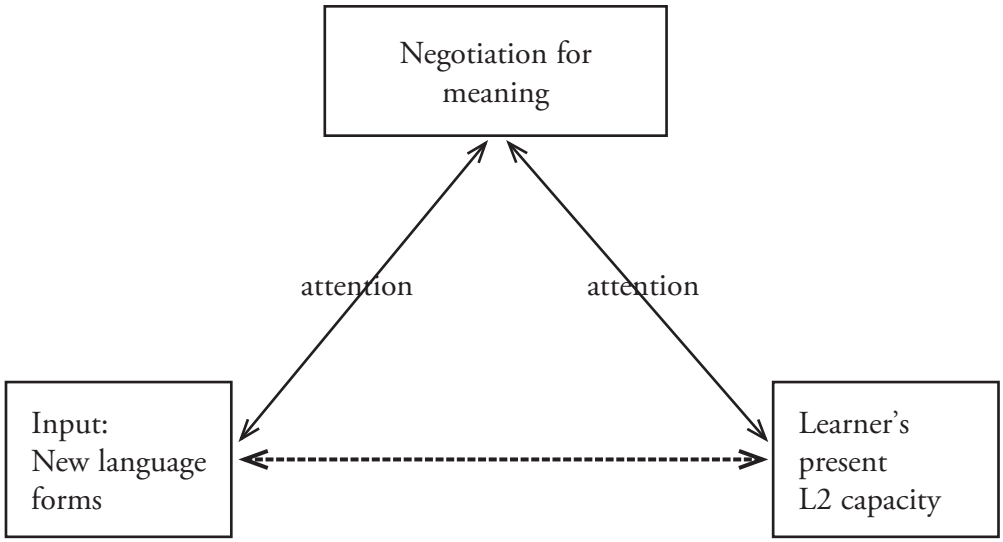

Figure 1. Negotiation for meaning as an attention-raising device

Learners perform these activities *subconsciously* when they try to figure out the meaning of a word, a phrase, or a sentence. They negotiate for meaning *consciously* when they are involved in output activities such as speaking and writing that provide them with both positive feedback, which builds their confidence, and negative feedback, which directs their attention to specific forms, thus making their learning more clearly targeted.

The role of output in L2 acquisition

Swain and Lapkin (1995) describe the importance of output to L2 acquisition, which is reiterated by Saville-Troike (2006), who states that meaningful interaction helps students notice "gaps in their own knowledge as they are forced to move from semantic to syntactic processing, which may lead learners to give more attention to relevant information" (75). Besides promoting fluency and collaborative problem solving, meaningful output contributes to language acquisition by arousing awareness of otherwise unnoticed L2 forms and makes the student "aware of something he or she needs to find out about L2 grammar" (Johnson 2004, 52).

These claims about output suggest that learners will pay attention to the language forms when they realize the mismatch between the intended meanings and the L2 forms available to them. Only when learners are aware that the forms needed are lacking from their L2 knowledge will they direct their attention to locating those forms, and only when those forms are noticed frequently enough will they be ingrained in learners' L2 inventory and acquired as explicit knowledge of the new language.

Schmidt (1990) feels that some features of noticing are crucial and require strategic intervention by teachers to be useful. Therefore, when planning a lesson, English teachers—as indispensable facilitators—should include output activities in their instructional strategies to help learners notice the gap in their English knowledge, thus making classroom teaching more effective for acquisition. Input and output of the target language, like two sides of the same coin, should not be separated from each other. Including writing (output) with reading (input) activities makes it more likely that the reading will leave a deeper impression on learners, thus enhancing long-term memory of the target language forms.

When teaching reading, instructors often use true-or-false statements, multiple-choice questions, or main-idea questions to check students' comprehension of the chosen materials; however, these assessments are typically only meaning-oriented and might not raise learners' attention to language forms. Therefore, these comprehension-checking activities should be accompanied by negotiating-for-meaning output activities that cause learners to consciously notice the gaps in their English knowledge. These negotiating-for-meaning activities should stick to one principle: focusing learners' attention on both meaning and form. In the following section, we will establish back translating as an activity where both input and output productively engage students in a task that highlights gaps in their knowledge of English.

Back translating

Back translating simply refers to the process of translating a translated text back to its original language. Back translating is beneficial for fostering learners' consciousness of the lexical, idiomatic, and syntactic differences between their native language and the target language. If properly used, this activity facilitates English acquisition. When used in reading classes, back translating can be broken down into the following three steps.

Step 1: Selecting an appropriate English text and preparing an L1 version

To begin, teachers should select the text with care, keeping in mind the length and the level of difficulty, as well as students' interest in the content. In ESL/EFL classes, learners are often at different proficiency levels, and their needs to make progress differ greatly. For this reason, it is important for instructors to know how to adapt reading tasks and exercises to make them accessible to various competence levels.

In our experience, the time allotted for the learners' back-translating process should be kept within 15 minutes; otherwise, there might be too much of a workload to maintain motivation. It is also acceptable to give learners a slightly longer piece to work on, even if some of them will not finish within 15 minutes. That will benefit the more

advanced learners and can make learning more self-adaptive.

Texts of varied contents or genres work well with this technique, but the selected texts should contain language forms relevant to students in their current situation or in some future English-use domains. Selecting a text purposefully is as simple as picking a text in the past tense if learners are studying the use of past tense. But if they are learning English for a specific purpose—say, business negotiation—dialogues containing potentially useful expressions such as, "I'm sorry to see that your price has risen," might be more relevant than, for example, an academic introduction to American business history.

Usable translated texts can be found in bilingual magazines that keep up with the times and contain interesting texts that match the learners' interest. Teachers can also select materials from classic literary works with available translated versions. If time permits, teachers can also be flexible and translate the texts themselves; this approach might be more convenient in providing effective teaching materials and at the same time has the advantage of allowing teachers to adequately familiarize themselves with those texts.

The length of the translated texts can range from one or two short sentences to longer paragraphs and should vary with reference to learners' English language level. For learners with low proficiency, simpler and shorter texts are preferable. Complex and longer texts should be used only with high-proficiency learners, and even then the length of the texts should be kept within a reasonable scope, for translating a long text can be intimidating and tiring and might make students lose interest.

Step 2: Translating the L1 text back into English

In class, the teacher asks learners to translate the L1 text back into English, in which it was originally written. Teachers may ask learners to do the translating in three ways: (1) independently, (2) with a partner, or (3) in groups. The choice depends on the time allocated to the activity, the learners' present English capacity, and the demands of the task. In general, the more learners who are involved in the task, the less demanding it is perceived to be, and the quicker it will be finished. We encourage collaborative work, since peer or group discussion offers the necessary scaffolds to move students to the next level of their English language ability by providing them with opportunities to pool their English-knowledge resources and work out solutions to problems that they could not solve independently. During the back-translating process, teachers ask learners to notice, or pay attention to, the particular meanings they could not convey in English, and later ask them to locate the corresponding forms in the original English text.

Step 3: Comparing the back-translated English text with the original

In this step, the teacher asks students to do a close comparison of their English back translation and the original English text. Before students do the comparison, teachers remind them that the goal of the back translation is to help them notice gaps in their English knowledge, not necessarily to come as close as possible to the original text. Teachers should also offer the following three explanations about the differences between the back translation and the original text: (1) the information learners get from the L1 translation is not 100 percent equivalent to that in the original English text; that is the nature of translation; (2) language is not like mathematics, in which there is most probably only one definite answer to a specific question; in language, there are usually different ways to express the same meaning, and it is likely that more than one expression is appropriate for a given situation; and (3) in back translating, learners may be restricted by their own English language ability and display a unique non-native style in their use of English.

The third explanation is important for learners to explore when doing the comparison of their back translation and the original. If learners clearly understand the goal of the activity—to notice the gaps in their English knowledge and the reasons that might be responsible for the difference between the original and the back translation—they will not be discouraged even if the original is very different from their own back translation, and they will become motivated to explore the causes of those differences.

When learners compare their back translation with the original, teachers give specific instructions to focus attention on the differ-

ences in students' L2 renditions by providing the following instructions:

- Study the difference in the choice of words or phrases between your back translation and the original, and discuss with a partner why those in the original constructions are more appropriate—or try to determine whether your wording is also appropriate and maybe just different.
- Study the syntactic difference between your back translation and the original, and discuss with your partner what leads to the difference and whether you were influenced by your L1 or the way of thinking that is specific to your native culture.
- Check whether there are any English culture-specific elements—such as figures of speech or references to cultural icons—that you need to become familiar with.

On the sentence level, back translation helps teachers and students notice a number of gaps related to grammar, vocabulary, collocations, and idioms. For example, the sentence "There was a middle-aged man walking up and down the street all last night" might be back-translated in a number of ways, but one gap might be revealed by a back translation that says, "There was a middle-aged man walked …," indicating a gap in the student's knowledge of the *there-be* structure. Other students might back-translate "last night" as "yesterday night," which for most English speakers is not idiomatic. Other gaps include difficulty back-translating "up and down the street" or "middle-aged." In each case, noticing the difference between the original and the back translation is a first step toward awareness of a gap and then filling in the gap. Gaps also arise with idiomatic expressions, such as when "strong as a horse" is back-translated as "strong as a cow," which draws attention to cultural differences and the ways similar concepts are expressed in different languages.

During the comparison process, teachers ask learners to pay attention to the difference between the way they and native speakers express meaning, and help them discover the source of the difference. Once the reason for the difference is noticed and understood, the English forms will leave a deeper impression on learners. Those learners, as active users of the target language, will have a more powerful meaning-conveying ability when they express similar meanings in the future. At first, and at lower levels, the instructor's guidance and feedback is necessary to help students develop their noticing skills, but with practice, learners can use the technique on their own.

This activity raises learners' consciousness about what to learn from the reading material (the original text). Since all the learners receive negative feedback unique to themselves, they will have different points of focus when listening to the teacher's explanation of the text or when doing their own analyses. Each of them will benefit from the classroom instruction in his or her own way.

Variations of the back-translating activity

Learners enjoy much freedom during the back-translating process and are not constrained by any translation principles, since the role of the translated text is only to provide them with meanings they are required to express in English. For learners who are at a lower level of English and not capable of covering the entire text, supplying the main idea in English is also acceptable, as this makes learning from back translating responsive to the students' needs. Writing only the main idea will not defeat the purpose of the activity, since it clearly reveals the forms that are necessary to express the intended meanings that are lacking in learners' English knowledge.

The back-translating activity can also be organized after an explanation or discussion of the reading material. Asking students to write out the story according to the translated text (or according to their memory) will leave them with a clear understanding of the language forms that they have already learned and those that are still lacking in their English inventory.

If time is short, this activity can also be done orally. In this case, teachers first supply the meaning of the original text in students' native language and then ask them to express the meaning in spoken English. We suggest that teachers present only one sentence at a time and if necessary ask learners to collaborate on the translation. If one learner can translate only part of a sentence, others may

be able to supply necessary language forms to complete the translation. Recasting or explicitly pointing out learners' gaps will also direct their attention to specific structures. This activity is flexible and can be adopted whenever and wherever teachers find there are language forms that need learners' special attention. It can also be used to uncover gaps that learners and teachers were previously unaware of.

Outside class, students can do back translating by themselves. As one exercise, teachers ask learners to read an article as an assignment and in the following week provide them with a translated version of the article for them to back-translate as another assignment. Teachers then ask them to compare their written work with the original text by referring to the three explanations in Step 3 above. To enhance the effectiveness of this after-class activity, teachers ask learners to hand in their back translations and briefly report to the whole class what they have learned regarding the gaps they noticed.

Conclusion

An instructional strategy that focuses attention on unknown language forms contributes to L2 acquisition. Without attention, new language forms are often passed over and do not become entrenched in the learner's L2 inventory. Reading is one of the most important ways to receive L2 input and is enhanced when integrated with output through writing, especially when both skills are employed in a back-translation activity requiring attention, noticing, and negotiating for meaning with the text to discover and acquire previously unknown language forms. Because back translating necessarily involves a detailed focus on students' English-knowledge gaps, it is well deserving of a place in the reading class.

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