

CHAPTER 20

TRANSLATION IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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INTRODUCTION

For a long time, translation has been the favoured method of foreign language teaching, before it was banned from the classroom, because it is restrictive, that is, it confines language practice to two skills only, i.e. reading and writing. However, the problem was not translation as such, but the teaching methodology, i.e., the grammar-translation method that separated language from its communicative function. Today, with the technological revolution in the fields of computer sciences and communication systems, the development of cultural and sociocultural exchanges, the teaching of language has become more lively with the introduction of the communicative approach. Translation itself, as it takes place in the real world, is essentially linked to a communicative purpose. As Duff (1989:6) puts it, "translation happens everywhere, all the time, so why not in the classroom?"

The purpose of translation in the language classroom is not to train professionals, but to help learners develop their knowledge of foreign language. Malmkjaer (1998) argues that if translation is taught in a way that resembles the real life activity of translating, it can bring into play the four basic language skills and yield benefits in L2 acquisition. In other words, to make the best use of translation in language teaching, it is necessary to know when and how to use it, so as to facilitate and accelerate language learning.

OBJECTIVES

In this chapter, we are going to discuss the meaning, structures and types of translation as related to classroom activities. The forms of translation in Arabic, French and Yoruba languages respectively would be discussed and relevant examples would be given. At the end of this chapter, you are expected to be able to:

1. define translation;
2. explain the structures of translation;
3. show situations where teachers can use translation; and
4. provide guidelines to promote the effective use of translation the language learning and teaching with special emphasis on situations where teachers may use translation.

WHAT IS TRANSLATION?

Translation is transferring the meaning of a text from one language to another language in order to make possible an exchange of information between the users of different languages. In so doing, the textual, the grammatical and the pragmatic meanings of the text to be translated are taken into consideration, implying that meaning necessitates reference to linguistic and non-linguistic factors embedded in the text. The main goal of translation is to establish a relation of equivalence between the source and target language texts, i.e the translator should ensure that both texts communicate the same message while taking to account a number of constraints. These

constraints include the context, the rules of grammar of languages, their writing conventions, their idioms and the likes.

The reason why translation is still ignored by many teachers as an effective language learning activity, even today, is mainly because teachers often feel that translation involves no oral interaction and therefore is not a communicative activity, and that it is not suited to the general needs of the language learner. Moreover, many of them consider use of the mother tongue in foreign language teaching undesirable, or feel that translation is time consuming, boring and irrelevant. This does not have to be the case. Our main concern here to try to establish the function of translation in consecutive stages of the language teaching process.

TRANSLATION AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

Many authors are in support that translation is a most useful, quick and easy way to present the meaning of words and contextualised items, and when it is necessary to draw attention to certain differences that would otherwise go unnoticed (Harmer 1991:162. Ellis 1992:49. Nunan, Lamb 1996-99). However, it would be inappropriate to limit the role of translation only to the presentation of lexical items. One should rather explore ways for its appropriate application within the communicative paradigm, and create challenging language activities which have cognitive depth. Hence, according to Nolasco (1995:59), translation activities pursued in a language classroom ought to meet the following criteria:

- (a) language is used for a purpose;
- (b) they create a desire for communication;
- (c) they encourage students to be creative and contribute to their ideas;
- (d) students are focused on what they are saying, rather than how they are saying it,
- (e) students work independently of the teacher; and
- (f) students determine what they want to say or write.

As previously mentioned, translation activities need not to be pursued in isolation, but should rather be included in existing courses. This chapter argues for a multi-directional or multi-skill integration, as the most effective both in pedagogical and organisational terms. Thus, translation can be used to teach different aspects of language.

TRANSLATION AND LANGUAGE TEACHING

Transliteration and interlingual transfer are strategies used in learning a foreign language. Transliteration is a literal rendition of the native language word or phrase (asking learners to expatiate upon, comment on, summarise or reappraise a text after reading it so as to internalise the vocabulary). As for interlingual transfer, it is rewording the text and interpreting verbal signs by means of some other languages, i.e. in the native or second language. Interlingual transfer has to account for total and full translation. Interlingual translation is the type of translation that should be fully taken into account in teaching translation for the purpose of learning a foreign language. In this approach, translation is looked upon as a series of operations of which the point of departure and the end product are functions within a given culture. That approach takes account of the translation of language at all levels.

At the phonological level: At the phonological level, students should be made aware of the different and similar sounds between the two languages, the native language (NL) and the foreign language (FL). In Arabic, for example, there are [c], [kh], [rh], and [gh] that are glottal and palatal sounds respectively, which do not exist in English and are pronounced with difficulty by non-native speakers of Arabic. At the same time, other sounds such as [a], [b], [d], [h], [f], [j], [t], [s], [z], [m], [n], [k], [l], and [r], among other sounds, are pronounced the same in English. Therefore, making students aware of the phonological systems of the two languages is extremely significant and undoubtedly useful. It is indeed useful in the sense that it makes them familiar with the different pronunciations of the sounds of the two languages.

At the semantic level: The other translation approach through which students can learn a foreign language is the semantic approach. Semantics, in its simplest form, is defined as the study of meaning. Through semantics, students become acquainted with the relations connecting between sentences compared with equivalent sentences in their native language. They also become acquainted with the fact that the vocabulary of a particular language is not simply a listing of independent items, but is organised into areas or fields within which words interrelate and define each other in different ways. For example, French and English languages share words that are written the same way, but have different meanings, e.g. *attend*, *location*, *agenda*, *assist*.

At the grammatical level: Furthermore, translation can be used to teach grammar. Here, teachers can show students equivalent and non-equivalent structures. For example, in French language, the sentence *Pierre va à l'école* can be explained in terms of its grammatical equivalents. *Pierre* is equivalent to *sujet* (subject) as in English and *va* can be explained in terms of its grammatical equivalent *verbe* (verb) and *à l'école* can be explained in terms of its grammatical equivalent *complement* (prepositional phrase). In terms of non-equivalent structures, the focus in the sentence *Biola is an intelligent student* should be on comparing adjectives. In English, adjectives precede nouns (S+V+ADJ+N) whereas in Arabic and French, adjectives follow nouns (as S+V+N+ADJ). It should also be noted that in French, adjectives agree in gender and number of the noun it is qualifying. Making students aware of these grammatical structures will benefit them significantly in understanding both foreign and native languages.

At the lexical level: Translation has also been used for teaching the lexis of a foreign language. It could incorporate a unit of vocabulary (lexical item or lexeme) or a complete inventory of lexical items of a language (lexicon). It could also incorporate items that are cited in a lexicon as a set of lexical entries.

In a foreign language, there are fixed expressions which are different from expressions in the native language. For example, in English, one can say *fish* and *chips* as an English collocation whereas the expression itself cannot collocate in Arabic. That is, in Arabic, *fish* does not collocate with *chips*. The expression *khubzu* and *milhu* (bread and salt) are Arabic collocants but not in English, as bread does not collocate with salt (cf. Shiyab & Abdullateef, 2001). These collocations and their importance can be put in focus through translation. This shows that using translation is indeed significant in the teaching of foreign language skills.

As regards the use of L1, its effect on language acquisition has been subject to many debates lately. Teachers should bear in mind that in the L2 situation, L1 should be employed judiciously. In addition, one should not lose sight of Duff's warning that language competence is a two-way system, that we need to be able to communicate back into the mother tongue, something that many professionals need to do in their daily work (Duff, 1989:6).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Apart from the fact that translation contributes to the improvement of speaking skills, it also provides a basis for discussion and thus suitable for the practising of other language skills. Depending on the students' needs, the teacher can also select material to illustrate particular aspects of language and structure with which the students have difficulty in the target language. By working through these difficulties in their mother tongue, students come to see the link between language and usage. One can therefore join Duff (1994) to say that translation develops three qualities essential to all language learning accuracy, clarity and flexibility. It trains the learner to search (flexibility) for the most appropriate words (accuracy) to convey what is meant (clarity).

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Define "translation".
2. Explain the structural levels of translation.
3. Discuss situations where teachers can use translation in teaching a foreign language.

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