Essays

In Defense of Translation

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The present paper discusses the problem of using L1 and translation as teaching aids in foreign language learning. By contrasting two methods of teaching English in an EFL class, the grammar translation method and the direct method, the article argues that whereas the direct method may be effective in small classes of motivated learners, the specific learning mechanism of adult students imposes the need to relate to their own culture and, which is more important, to relate to their native language through translation. Moreover, by stressing the importance of considering the influence of socio-political and cultural factors upon student motivation and performance in foreign language acquisition, the article pleads for more flexibility in the use of L1 in order to reach the specific goals of foreign language learning.

1. Grammar Translation Method

Translation in foreign language acquisition has been often associated with the so-called grammar-translation method. Originally used for the teaching of Greek and Latin in European countries, the *classical method*, known later on as the *grammar-translation method,* is centered on the acquisition of grammatical rules as the basis of translating from L2 (the foreign language) to L1 (the learners' native language) (Brown 1993:16). The main characteristics of this 'method with no theory', as Richards and Rodgers (2001) named it, are listed by Prato and Celce-Murcia (cited in Brown 1993:16) below:

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1 Classes are taught in the mother tongue, with little active use of the target language.
2 Much vocabulary is taught in the form of lists of isolated words.
3 Long elaborate explanations of the intricacies of grammar are given.
4 Grammar provides the rules for putting words together, and instruction often focuses on the form and inflections of words.
5 Reading of difficult classical texts is begun early.
6 Little attention is paid to the content of texts, which are treated as exercises in grammatical analysis.
7 Often the only drills are exercises in translating disconnected sentences from the target language into the mother tongue.
8 Little or no attention is given to pronunciation.

The following disadvantages derive from using this method in a foreign language class:
   1. The method is focused primarily on grammar, and seems to miss the functional aspect of language, failing to establish effective communication between individuals.

2. It focuses on reading and writing rather than listening and speaking.

3. It emphasizes a rather passive and limited production of utterances, which must strictly observe the grammatical rules learned in class.

4. Stresses memorization or rote learning rather than skill acquisition and does not provide enough freedom of departure from the pattern.

5. Creates the false impression that everything about the SL (source language) is perfectly transferable into TL (target language). It encourages the naïve view that every word or expression in the SL has one exact equivalent in the TL. Referring to the problem of lack of exact equivalents, Winter points out that, '[E]ven the simplest, most basic requirement we make of translation cannot be met without difficulty: one cannot always match the content of a message in language A by an expression with exactly the same content in language B, because what can be expressed and what must be expressed is a property of a specific language in much the same way as how it can be expressed' (1961:98).

   Not only do languages differ substantially in terms of structure, grammar, sounds etc., but also in their ways of presenting reality, and as Halliday remarks, '[L]anguage… gives structure to experience, and helps to determine our way of looking at things, so that it requires some intellectual effort to see them in any other way than that which our language suggests to us' (1970:143).

6. Leaves students in ignorance of such issues as culture, purpose, context and practicality, producing texts which, in Henry Sweet's opinion, look like 'a bag into which is crammed as much grammatical and lexical information as possible' (1899/1964:101).

7. Since it often uses sentences disconnected from their context of occurrence, the method ignores such basic concepts as cohesion and coherence, and the students are prone to produce aberrant translations of the kind *The merchant is swimming with the gardener's son, but the Dutchman has the fine gun.* (Sweet 1899/1964:74).

Some of the positive aspects of the method are:

1. It enables the students to use their native language as a learning aid, which helps beginner level students build up their confidence and improves the communication between teacher and class. Thus translation method can be used at all levels.

2. Has helped many students of English (including myself) become proficient without any contact whatsoever with native speakers of English.

3. It helps the learners realize differences between linguistic systems and ways of organizing reality, giving them insight not only into 'what to say' in a foreign language, but also 'how to say' it.

4. If the study materials are well chosen, the method gives the students exposure to authentic language and culture, which helps broaden their cultural knowledge.

2. The direct method

Other methods of foreign language acquisition were proposed and applied as a reaction against the highly traditionalistic method of grammar translation, among which the direct method, pioneered by Maximilian Berlitz. It consists of the following principles:

1	Classroom instruction was conducted exclusively in the target language.
2	Only everyday vocabulary and sentences were taught.
3	Oral communication skills were built up in a carefully graded progression organized around question-and-answer exchanges between teachers and students in small, intensive classes.
4	Grammar was taught inductively.
5	New teaching points were introduced orally.
6	Concrete vocabulary was taught through demonstration, objects, and pictures; abstract vocabulary was taught by association of ideas.
7	Both speech and listening comprehension were taught.
8	Correct pronunciation and grammar were emphasized.

The guidelines, which are still followed in Berlitz schools at present, are shown below (Titone 1968:100-101):

> Never translate: demonstrate
> Never explain: act
> Never make a speech: ask questions
> Never imitate mistakes: correct
> Never speak with single words: use sentences
> Never speak too much: make students speak much
> Never use the book: use your lesson plan
> Never jump around: follow your plan
> Never go too fast: keep the pace of the student
> Never speak too slowly: speak normally
> Never speak too quickly: speak naturally
> Never speak too loudly: speak naturally
> Never be impatient: take it easy

The direct method also has its merits and demerits. It is more interactive than the grammar translation method, and it offers relatively ampler opportunity to (motivated) students to express themselves and acquire everyday spoken vocabulary faster. However, as critics have pointed out, while it may be effective in person-to-person teaching or in small classes of children, whose language acquisition process is different from that of adults, in large classes of (Japanese adult) learners, it is often frustrating for the teacher and students to perform verbal gymnastics in order to convey the meaning of English words in Japanese, when translation would be more efficient (Brown 1973).

3. The setting: Japan

Before analyzing the importance of being familiar with the cultural idiosyncrasies of the foreign language learners, one must point out that the study of language cannot be dissociated from the study of culture. As Brody (2003) points out, 'culture is negotiated in large part through language, and language codifies many cultural assumptions and values' (p. 40). On the other hand, the acquisition of a second/foreign language and culture has been largely discussed in the literature; however, it is important to consider the fact that 'the conceptualization of sociocultural

frameworks and the structure of L1 beliefs, knowledge, presuppositions, and behaviors remain predominantly first culture-bound even for advanced and proficient native speakers' (Hinkel et al. 1999:7). As Byram and Morgan (1994:43) point out, '[l]earners cannot simply shake off their own culture and step into another … their culture is a part of themselves and created them as social beings … Learners are 'committed' to their culture and to deny any part of it is to deny something within their own being'. Indeed, a considerable amount of research into SL/FL acquisition deals with the learning of a second/foreign language and culture unilaterally, without indicating the necessity of relating them to the students' native language and culture. No matter how much the SL/FL teachers will try to instill the cultural values of the second/foreign language into the minds of students, they cannot do so without being aware of the students' language and culture, as well as their specific needs and motives which drive them to learn a foreign language. Moreover, in the case of the relationship between L1 and L2 in foreign language learning, recent studies have shown that '… a learner's L1 is one of the most important factors in learning L2 vocabulary' (Schmitt and McCarthy 1997:2). That is to say that adult learners acquire a L2 by constantly linking it phonologically, semantically and associationally with their native languages (Channell 1988:93).

3.1. Second language acquisition vs. foreign language learning

The study of a language within a cultural context gives the learners what Hymes (1966) calls *communicative competence,* defined as 'what a speaker needs to know to communicate appropriately within a particular speech community' (Saville-Troike 2003a) or as 'that aspect of our competence that enables us to convey and interpret messages and to negotiate meanings interpersonally within specific contexts' (Brown 1993:227). Communicative competence branches out into a) grammatical competence, b) discourse competence, c) sociolinguistic competence, and d) strategic competence.

Saville-Troike (2003b:3-17) and others (Judd 1999, Brown 1993) point out the importance of making a clear distinction between teaching English as a *second language* and teaching English as a *foreign language* in terms of several parameters, such as social function, students' motivation to acquire pragmatic competence, class composition and size etc. Whereas the process of *second language* acquisition unfolds within the context of the target speech community, and the students' motivation to acquire native proficiency is given mostly by their living and working *within* the community (the case of immigrants), students learn a *foreign language* within the context of their native culture and 'have little opportunity even to interact with members of the speech community that speaks the foreign language natively, and little opportunity (or need) to become part of it' (Saville-Troike 2003b:6). The motivation to learn a foreign language may range from fashion, interest and curiosity to gaining reading competence in a field of specialization or to improve one's job opportunities and social status (Brown 1993). Although the usages of terms 'second language acquisition' and 'foreign language learning' are often interchangeable, Saville-Troike stresses the fact that the curriculum, methods and testing should be based on a realistic appraisal of the goals of instruction and background of the student and must be appropriate for the communicative needs of the learners (2003b:15).

3.2. The situation of English as a foreign language in Japan

This subchapter is an investigation of socio-political and cultural backgrounds of learning English as a foreign language. The paper does not intend to endorse the so-called 'nihonjinron', or

theories which claim the uniqueness or superiority of Japanese people as a race, culture or nation. Rather, it aims at presenting a more or less objective image of the concrete situation of EFL in Japan in order to demonstrate that specific conditions (very little exposure to English outside class, low student motivation, and the fact that the acquired English skills are not likely to be used for practical purposes of living or working) require careful study and consideration of why and how Japanese students learn English. In other words, the discussion aims at showing that cultural awareness combined with an effective use of the L1 is an important component of the EFL class. EFL teachers work better with their students if they are aware of the motives behind their students' behavior, expectation, perspectives and values (Cortazzi and Jin 1999).

Japanese students in English classes have been perceived as passive or even apathetic by many EFL teachers and authors (Burden (2002) and McVeigh (2001)). Many teachers (including myself) who came to Japan with high expectations, were baffled to find themselves teaching English to a class of apparently uninterested and unmotivated students. Were the expectations too high, or was the students' motivation too low? The answer is, both. Moreover, there is one more main reason which impedes a smooth development of the relationship between teacher and class. That is the lack of communication. A few reasons may be invoked for this:

- misunderstanding of the students' cultural background – wrongly assuming that Japanese students are as active, involved and outspoken as the students in Western cultures
- lack of genuine communication between teacher and class – an English only method is intimidating for beginners
- the class is centered on the teacher's exposition rather than on students' working in small groups
- materials, most of which are written in English only, present topics related to other cultures, without giving the students the possibility of thinking of their own culture in a foreign language
- a contradictory state policy which, while stressing the importance of learning to communicate effectively in English, maintains a rigid system of entrance examinations which exaggerates the importance of grammar.

3.2.1. The policy

In an insightful article entitled *The bear and the honeycomb: A history of Japanese English language policy,* Matthew Reesor offers a few historical facts which, in his opinion, account for the relatively poor English proficiency of Japanese learners. He claims that to blame are not the much invoked arguments of geography or 'insularity' of the Japanese people, or the uniqueness of their bodies, language and culture, but rather a defective education policy which seems to reflect Japan's love/hate relationship with the rest of the world. Despite its long history of self-inflicted isolationism and rejection of everything foreign, Japan has sought to absorb the technology of the West, and the compulsory study of English was introduced by the Ministry of Education in the middle school curriculum late in the 19th century. However, notwithstanding the attempts of several American scholars towards a more communicative approach, the English language curriculum has been dominated by the grammar-translation method, a method which most Japanese teachers of English (some of whom had a limited English proficiency) found more comfortable. However, the efforts of native English instructors participating in such programs as JET have proved successful, in that there has been a certain opening from the Ministry of Education towards endorsing more communicative learning goals. The *Course of Study for Senior*

High School, published by the Japanese Ministry of Education, states as objectives for ELT: 'To develop students' ability to understand and to express themselves in a foreign language; to foster students' positive attitude towards communicating in a foreign language, and to heighten their interest in language and culture, thus deepening international understanding' (Wada 1994:1).

Nevertheless, the rigid requirements of the entrance examination system have failed to reflect these changes, and English is at present the language which most Japanese students of all ages love to hate. Reesor points out that in terms of motivation, 'without exaggeration, it may be said that entrance examinations have been (and remain) the prime motivation for English study for Japanese students' (Reesor 2002:49). Since the results of entrance examinations are decisive for the future course of the students' lives, it is understandable that everybody, from students and parents to teachers, prefers grammar to communication. As Sakui (2004:158) points out, citing a Japanese teacher of English in a Japanese high school, '…English teachers in Japan, especially in high schools, are forced to wear two pairs of shoes. One is for the entrance exam… At the same time, we need to teach English for communication. I find it difficult…'According to Rose (1999), most Asian countries where English is taught as a compulsory foreign language are confronted more or less with low student motivation and with the situation where the students' grammatical competence surpasses their communication skills.

3.2.2. Cultural factors

Senko Maynard (1997) summarizes below a few points which outline a rather stereotypical image of Japanese culture.

1. group oriented (vs. American 'individual-oriented')
2. shame oriented (vs. western 'guilt-oriented')
3. intuitive/emotional (vs. western 'rational/logical')
4. harmonizing (vs. American 'confronting')
5. high-context (vs. western 'low-context') (p. 29)

She points out that in reality this holds only partially, and the apparent group cohesion or harmony of Japanese culture may be more or less internalized and rather prompted by the individual's need for acceptance and integration in the group. In an article addressing cultural differences in teaching and learning, Geert Hofstede (1986) contrasts collectivist and individualist societies according to several parameters such as attitude towards tradition vs. novelty, attitude towards learning, teachers, education in general and behavior within the group (see Appendix 1). With no intention of endorsing the collectivist label which is applied to Japanese culture, every one who has ever had the experience of teaching English to a Japanese class will agree that Japanese learners display more collectivist than individualist traits.

Japanese culture is a collectivistic aggregate of individuals who are all subjected to one purpose – to live in harmony and consensus with the other members of the group (Lebra 1976). From an early age, Japanese children are taught that they belong in a group and that group interests are prevalent over their own interests. School and other education institutions have a decisive role in educating young Japanese in the spirit of conformism and uniformity. As Shimahara points out, 'Japanese are trained to be diligent, resilient, and convergent and to endure organizational pressures' (1979:170). From a young age, Japanese people in a group relate to their peers not on a one-to-one basis, but on a group basis, which means that they strive for cohesion and avoid taking a different stand from the other members of their group.

Nakane and others have stressed the importance of interpreting interpersonal relationships within and without a given group in the light of such dual concepts as *uchi*/*soto* (or *uchi*/*yoso*), *honne*/*tatemae*, *ura*/*omote* (Nakane 1970, Shimahara 1979). As Lebra (1976) pointed out, 'the overwhelming influence of school education on Japanese children seems to stem not only from hierarchical pressures of teachers, school administrators, and government, but also from *horizontal pressures of schoolmates for conformity…*' (p. 29, my emphasis).

Many an enthusiastic EFL teacher who attempted to apply the direct method, which stresses, among others, the exclusive use of L2, the interdiction to translate, and the necessity of making the students talk, have been met with silent hostility or at least with silence. Authors such as Burden (2002) and McVeigh (2001) describe Japanese students as apathetic or passive; however, there is more than apathy behind this silence. The hesitation of Japanese students to play a more active part in the English class is related to their status as members of the group in several ways. First, the reluctance to stand out reflects the conformism of the Japanese individual within the group. Inside the group, conformity levels up the reactions of its members, acting as 'an egalitarian pressure against arrogant, overbearing group members; externally it is mobilized to build a united front, especially when the group faces an external threat' (Lebra 1976:29). The much quoted saying '*deru kugi wa utareru*' (the protruding nail is hammered down) expresses the internal pressure for conformity. Even those students who know the answer to a question hesitate to answer because in doing so they would be regarded as a threat to the cohesion of the group, which acts as a united front against the threat (that is, the teacher). On the other hand, the fear of making mistakes and thus losing face in front of the others is another reason for hesitation. While a good performance makes everybody in the group proud, failure to play up to everybody's expectations ends up in everybody feeling responsible for the failure.

4. A possible solution

It is worth saying that the process of teaching must be closely intertwined with that of learning. As Confucian philosophy suggests, 'teaching and learning influence and improve each other' (Cortazzi and Jin 1999:217). That is to say, the teacher must be open to her students' language and culture. At least two advantages derive from this attitude. The first advantage is that it helps developing of rapport between the class and the teacher and motivates students (Rose 1999, Cortazzi and Jin 1999). The second advantage is that, especially in an EFL situation, where classes are more linguistically homogeneous, the L1 information may help the teacher understand how a certain speech act in L2 may or may not cause difficulties for students (Judd 1999). Besides contributing to improving verbal communication between the class and the teacher, the former helps students perceive their teacher in a new light – that of learner, and his/efforts do not escape the students.

Recent years have witnessed a revival of interest vis-à-vis the use of translation in ESL/EFL teaching. Cook mentions several factors which have enabled this reappraisal of translation, among which the increased value attached to learning translation as an end in itself, criticism of the chauvinist and illogical idea that native speaker teachers are always the best, and the awareness that translation involves more than formal equivalence (Cook 1998:119). One of the virtues of the translation method is that the learner, constrained by the original text, must confront directly the difficult issues of the L2, which otherwise he/she would avoid. Moreover, translation promotes awareness of the subtle differences between languages, thus discrediting the idea that every word/expression in a given L1 has a perfect equivalent in L2. As Howatt (1982:161) points out,

'[T]he practice of translation has been condemned so strenuously for so long without any really convincing reasons that it is perhaps time the profession took another look at it'. Translation exercises which target several specific audiences enable a clearer perception of the variety of ways in which one sentence may be rendered. I must add that interpretation practice, besides giving the students the possibility of exercising their creativity and gaining flexibility of mind, helps them to adjust to the speed of communication and gives them a more comprehensive image of language as a means of communication.

Weschler (1997) proposes a new model which he calls The Functional Translation Method. He bases his demonstration on the premises that, according to the findings of COBUILD project, native speakers use a relatively small number of words in order to communicate most of their intended meanings. These words are repackaged in a number of set phrases, which occur frequently in everyday communication. Theorists of the so-called Lexical Approach, who support these findings, suggest that 'increasing competence and communicative power are achieved by extending the students' repertoire of lexical phrases, collocational power, and increasing mastery of the most basic words and structures of the language. It is simply not the case that 'advanced' users of the language use ever more complex sentence structures' (Lewis 1993). Moreover, they suggest that there is a certain degree of overlapping of such set phrases among different cultures, and advise that 'the teaching of lexical collocations in EFL should concentrate on items for which there is no direct translational equivalence in English and in the learners' respective mother tongues' (Bahns 1993:58). In his functional translation model, Weschler divides the issue into 4 parts (the goal, the type of language, the materials and the classroom procedures) and contrasts the features of his model to those of the traditional grammar-translation. Here are a few of his ideas.

• The goal:
1. To express one's own ideas
2. To negotiate meaning and train for tolerance of ambiguity
3. To supply with useful language for communication
4. To promote fluency
5. To encourage experimentation

• The type of language:
1. Chunked phrase/idea level
2. Social functional meaning
3. Spoken conversational patterns and dialogues
4. Current, colloquial, idiomatic language
5. Relevant to students' needs and interests
6. Function (i. e. Meaning)
7. Fewer frequent, useful phrases
8. Simple and direct
9. Inductive, discovery driven
10. In-context

• The materials:
1. Produced by Japanese and native-speakers working together
2. Standard, correct English
3. Exploratory, collaborative

4. Stimulating, graphically-based
5. Contextualized, bilingual
6. Designed for pair or group work

• The classroom procedures:
1. Observe-Hypothesize-Experiment Cycle
2. Student-output driven (What they want to say)
3. Student-centered pair/group work
4. Top-down, macro synthesis
5. Warm-up L1 brainstorming
6. Allow for peer and self-correction
7. 'How do you say ……in English?'

Besides proposing a shift from a teacher-centered expository class activity to a student centered activity, Weschler's method does not ban the use of the students' native language, but rather proposes that the L1 be viewed as the scaffolding which sustains the building of L2 skills. Also, the use of bilingual materials makes it easier for students to understand the meaning of L2 phrases and at the same time sensitizes them to formal and semantic differences between the two languages. In this way the teacher is spared the physical and mental effort of having to demonstrate or 'act' the meaning of a concrete or abstract idea, and the students benefit from a more adult-oriented and communicative study approach, where they do not have to memorize thousands of isolated words without using any nor do they need to feel frustrated by having to 'forget' their own language.

Conclusion

Over the past few decades, the use of L1 in general and the translation method in particular have been banished from EFL classrooms, on (justified) grounds which have been mentioned in this article. However, when conceived as beneficially contributing to the smooth development of the learning process, and when employed towards reaching communicative learning goals, L1 and translation may spare the teachers a lot of vocal and physical effort. To this end, it is necessary to have a good knowledge of the cultural patterns which influence the students' behavior in order to interpret them correctly and to design appropriate teaching strategies and materials which concord with the students' motivations, expectations and interests. The use of translation and interpreting from and into L2 enables the students to become more familiar with the specific terms and expressions used in various situations, encourages them to solve communication tasks by themselves and gives them a more interactive image of communication.

Appendix 1

Differences in Teacher/Student and Student/Student Interaction Related to the Individualism vs. Collectivism Dimension (Hofstede 1986:312)

Collectivist Societies	Individualist Societies
• Positive association in society with whatever is rooted in tradition	• Positive association in society with whatever is "new"
• The young should learn; adults cannot accept student role	• One is never too old to learn; "permanent education"
• Students expect to learn how to do	• Students expect to learn how to learn
• Individual students will only speak up in class when called upon personally by the teacher	• Individual students will speak up in class in response to a general invitation by the teacher
• Individuals will only speak up in small groups	• Individuals will speak up in large groups
• Large classes split socially into smaller; cohesive subgroups based on particularist criteria (e.g., ethnic affiliation)	• Subgroupings in class vary from one situation to the next based on universalist criteria (e.g., the task "at hand")
• Formal harmony in learning situations should be maintained at all times	• Confrontation in learning situations can be salutary; conflicts can be brought into the open
• Neither the teacher nor any student should ever be made to lose face	• Face-consciousness is weak
• Education is a way of gaining prestige in one's social environment and of joining a higher status group	• Education is a way of improving one's economic worth and self-respect based on ability and competence
• Diploma certificates are important and displayed on walls	• Diploma certificates have little symbolic value
• Acquiring certificates even through [dubious] means is more important that acquiring competence	• Acquiring competence is more important than acquiring certificates
• Teachers are expected to give preferential treatment to some students (e.g., based on ethnic affiliation or on recommendation by an influential person)	• Teachers are expected to be strictly impartial

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