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Translation as a Teaching Tool: Challenges and suggestions from translation studies and the translation industry

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I am grateful to the organisers of the British Association for Teaching Japanese as a Foreign Language conference for the invitation to speak at their annual conference, held in Norwich in 2016, and the chance to attend several fascinating talks. I also wish to thank the editors of the BATJ Journal for publishing this summary of my talk.

My starting point was that translation is a standard resource in the language teacher’s toolkit, but an ambivalent one. During the “communicative turn” of recent decades, translation fell out of fashion as the student’s mother tongue was discouraged, or even banned, in the modern languages classroom (Tsagari and Floros 2013; Carreres 2006). Angeles Carreres explains that, for those who stressed audio-lingual and communicative methods for language learning, use of the student’s mother tongue was counter-productive in the process of acquiring a new language. Using translation in the classroom was often believed do more harm than good.

A 2013 study by the Directorate General for Translation, the specialist translation unit at the European Commission, found that this was view still widespread:

In many cases translation is frowned upon in the L2\textsuperscript{1} classroom, along with the use of L1 generally. If stakeholders believe that L1 should be excluded from the L2 classroom, in tune with ideals of ‘immersion’ and the teacher as a ‘native speaker’, then translation activities are automatically excluded as well. Translation nevertheless remains present as scaffolding to help learners initially, as a traditional means of checking on acquisition, and in learners’ ‘mental translation’ processes, when they internally relate L2 to L1 even when L1 is not used in class.

The predominant ideologies of language learning can create a sense of guilt associated with the use of translation – it is something teachers and learners do, but they feel they should not be doing – and there may even be a sense of translation as a retrograde pedagogical activity, a remnant of the nineteenth-century grammar translation method.

However, the current research and discussion, coupled with the changing landscape of the way language resources are used in multilingual societies and social media, indicates that the question is far from settled, and that the communicative use of translation has much to offer the L2 learner.

It would thus be desirable for steps to be taken to foster a view of translation as a goal-driven communicative activity and to encourage the creative use of translation in the classroom, in all communication media. This should involve giving L2 teachers at all levels access to a communicative and interactive view of translation, through publications, online materials or short training courses.

The tone of the recommendation here is rather paternalistic: it seems odd to assume that L2 teachers need to be “given” access to such resources, for example. However, some longstanding conflicts and challenges in relation to translation and language learning might indeed fruitfully be challenged and overcome. Rather than “doing more harm than good”, integrating understanding from translation offers benefits for language learners

\textsuperscript{1}translation
and teachers, as Cook (2009) and Witte et al. (2009) have argued in their respective calls to move away from a ‘pure’ communicative or immersive approach to language teaching.

What are the main conflicts and challenges to such re-integration of translation in the language curriculum, beyond changing fashions in pedagogy? With the development of Translation Studies as an academic specialism in its own right in recent decades, and the growth of the translation industry in the era of globalisation, translation has taken centre stage as a distinct skill and professional activity. Language-learning skills have been separated from translation skills, in many countries’ universities and training institutions. Some illustrations now demonstrate this point.

First, modern languages are typically either learned through immersion as ‘native’ speakers or learned at school or undergraduate level, while specialist translation skills are generally developed at postgraduate level, in separate specialist modules, or by professional practice and/or professional qualifications.

Second, universities have moved to separate modern foreign language teaching and translator and interpreter training, and the associated research specialisms. Until relatively recently, and still today in some parts of the world, academics in modern language departments might have practised translation, often spending decades working on their critical translations of canonical literary texts, for example. Increasingly, though, translation specialists are concentrated in separate academic departments, often in separate dedicated centres for Translation Studies, established over the past twenty to thirty years as the new academic discipline established itself. Translation and interpreting researchers are now also commonly based in specialisms such as Applied Linguistics, Computing, Comparative Literature, Forensic Science or Psychology, rather than Modern Languages. In the UK, the number of students taking degree-level courses in modern languages has fallen dramatically, so this development has accompanied the closing of many university language departments, with modern languages also increasingly taught in separate Language Centres, or via university-wide language programmes (e.g. ab initio or specialist provision for students of subjects like engineering or business studies).

Third, the specialist skills needed by professional interpreters and translators have been subject to increasing “technologisation” (Gouadec, 2007). This means that interpreting and translation students typically receive training in advanced technical tools for terminology mining/management, translation memory, localisation, subtitling, dubbing, conference interpreting (booths, mobile booths), remote (video/phone) interpreting, and translation project management. Language teachers are unlikely to be able to train students to work with such tools, technologies and approaches unless they themselves practise professionally alongside their teaching.

Translation has also been caught up in further divisions and conflicts. Many have called attention to a split between translation theory and translation practice (Chesterman and Wagner, 2002/2010). There is a split between the translation industry in different cultures and ‘locales’²: the Japanese translation and publishing industries are distinct from those in European or North American contexts, though this has been under-researched and misunderstood (Tymoczko, 2009). There is a split between how translation is taught today and how students will work in the industry in future decades - globalisation, increasingly powerful technologies and the Internet Age will mean radical change in the skills needed.

The challenges are many, and may be off-putting. For instance, Translation Studies as a discipline, like any other, has developed its own meta-language, which can be intimidating for non-specialists who may not feel comfortable discussing the Skopos of a translation or how to avoid the known features of ‘translationese’. Such challenges have arguably been exacerbated by an ironic lack of communication between specialists in Translation Studies and foreign language learning. Yet recent research on translation points to useful approaches, some of which my session went on to discuss. In particular, I focused on some suggestions for effective classroom methods from recent research in Translation Studies and on the translation industry, by first explaining a key assumption or claim, then pointing to suggestions for classroom activities which might explore or challenge these. Two of the issues discussed at the conference are below outlined as an illustration.
Claim 1: There is a theory-practice divide between translation in the ‘real world’ and the classroom

Research on the industry has demonstrated how ill-equipped students of both languages and translation are when they join the profession (e.g. Gouadec, 2007). For example, the average industry translation production rate is around 2,000 words per day (Drugan, 2013); and professional translators are often expected to produce ‘just in time’, ‘fit for purpose’ or ‘good enough’ translation, not the best possible quality, depending on client needs and deadlines. In classroom settings, however, students are unlikely to be asked to translate texts of this length, and will usually have at least a week to translate their much shorter texts. Related to this in the real world is the concept of ‘overkill’: the best use of limited resources (funding, but also translator time and expertise) is not always to produce the best translation possible, but rather to produce the most appropriate level of quality for a given need, and no more than this. In the classroom, students are likely to aim for the highest possible mark, so do their best work. Conversely, if they produce lower quality translations, it is unlikely to be because they are considering client needs or rational use of resources: rather, they may not be competent to produce translations at differentiated quality levels, or may not prioritise the homework task as they have competing demands on their time or the translation does not ‘count’ for their final assessed mark. Motivation is very different in classroom contexts.

Suggestions for the language-learning classroom

Task-based learning approaches are widespread in modern language teaching, and offer a straightforward way to introduce a critical understanding of industry practice. For example, students might be asked to translate the same source text for different purposes. Students might be asked to formulate their own translation brief or commission then work in two or three groups to translate the source text for each corresponding purpose, perhaps also working at different speeds (250 words/hour, 250 words/day), and with or without peer revision. For example, the same briefing document might be translated for an internal meeting of informed company staff, for external specialist readers and for a summary for non-specialists to be published on the company website. Another option is to invite students to translate orally out of L1 into the L2, without reference to dictionaries or other support, for information purposes: in the industry, both interpreters and translators are often required to ‘sight-translate’ or ‘gist’ documents such as emails, police cautions and so on in this way. Each class could involve at least one student performing such as gist translation task, which can be relatively concise and requires no prior preparation on students’ part.

Claim 2: Relatively weak L2 learners may be successful translators; conversely, mother tongue speakers are not necessarily successful translators

Different skills are needed for language learning in comparison to interpreting and translation. For example, in the case of professional translators, L1 fluency is critical, while the ability to recall L2 vocabulary and oral/aural skills may be virtually irrelevant. This means that differing levels of attention must be paid to linguistic aspects such as accuracy, style, accent, register, and non-language aspects, such as confidence, employability, marketing, business acumen, or networking.

A long-standing “axiomatic” assumption (Kelly, 1979), even a sacred cow, in Translation Studies and the translation profession has been that translators should always work out of their L2 into L1 for reasons of quality. For example, according to UNESCO’s Nairobi Declaration (1976, 14(d)), “A translator should, as far as possible, translate into his own mother tongue or into a language of which he or she has a mastery equal to that of his or her mother tongue”. Similarly, the UK professional body, the Institute for Translation and Interpreting, emphasizes to translation clients that “Professional translators work into their native language. As a translation buyer, you may not be aware of this, but a translator who flouts this basic rule is likely to be ignorant of other important quality issues as well.”
However, research has failed to demonstrate a straightforward or sustained link between translation quality and language direction. Some translators work equally well in both directions; conversely, research has found that bilinguals may translate less expertly in either direction (Diamond and Shreve, 2017). An experienced translator working in a highly specialised domain may be better able to translate a technical text out of L1 into L2 than a ‘native’ speaker without the same level of domain expertise. Standard practice in the industry remains for translators to work from L2 into L1, but there are multiple exceptions.

Suggestions for the language-learning classroom

These research findings and the corresponding range of professional practice open up positive opportunities for language learners. Rather than students becoming frustrated at their perceived or relative lack of competence, we can emphasise the differing strengths each individual may bring. One way to integrate this approach in the classroom is to encourage self-evaluation by students on a range of skills relating not only to language (L2), but also to L1 and translation: where do their strengths and weaknesses lie? To help students do this, they might be asked to interpret (orally) and to translate (textually) the same or related content then ask them which they found easier or less stressful. Following review of their translations, they might be asked to reflect on whether they preferred working at speed or perfectionist revision of their work. Opportunities are not restricted to roles as interpreters or translators alone in today’s language services industry, and students might consider which of their skills and preferences are needed for different roles such as multilingual project management. As a group, the class might be asked to practise translating in both directions (into and out of L1), then the translations can be anonymised and shared, with the class asked to vote on whether a translation was performed by a ‘native’ speaker or not. Here, using a diverse range of real text types (menus, website, marketing materials and so on) offers the chance to measure which kinds of translation might work well or badly into the L2. Students can be asked how they could tell if a text was translated by a native speaker, or what the typical features of ‘translationese’ were for the En>Ja or Ja>En language pair. They can then reflect on how they might avoid these features in their own future work.

In conclusion, translation can help language learners approach the L2 in positive new ways, and may therefore improve student-teacher communication and interaction. For example, research by Lee (in Tsagari and Floros, 2013) has shown that reading then translating English texts into Chinese improved students’ comprehension of the English source text when tested, because translation requires more careful reading. Translation could therefore be used to improve reading comprehension for tests, for instance. Further research by Källkvist (ibid.) found that translating L1 texts into L2 in class increased “student-initiated interaction” with teachers around gaining information or grammatical understanding, offering a possible solution to a perennial challenge for language teachers.

My hope is that, if anyone recognised their experience in the European Commission report (that translation is something teachers and learners do, but they feel they should not be doing), these suggestions will have offered a new way to consider translation; and for those who were already convinced, that this summary offers at least one or two new suggestions for how to integrate translation into your teaching practice in future.

Notes

1 Translation Studies typically refers to the L1 (an individual’s strongest language, full fluency), L2 (a learned or weaker language, even if this is used at a very high ‘near-native’ level) and so on. These terms are preferred to ‘native language’ / ‘mother tongue’ and ‘foreign language’, for several reasons. For example, many interpreters, in particular, are bilinguals who may not recognise a single ‘native’ language.

2 The term ‘locale’ is preferred in many professional and Translation Studies contexts. It refers to the combination of language variant and geographical location and originated in the specialist field of software localisation, which focuses on adapting and translating software for use in specific geographical/linguistic contexts. For example, we might distinguish between the EN-GB (British English) and EN-US (American English) locales.
In Translation Studies, the concept of translation purpose is referred to as the Skopos following the work by German scholars Hans Vermeer and Katharina Reiss.


This should perhaps not have been such a surprising finding, given the expectation that interpreters do this as a matter of course.

References


