

OTHERING THROUGH IDIOMS AT THE ESL CLASS

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Abstract: Translation has been practically completely eliminated from second and foreign language teaching. Indeed, the focus in teaching is on the use of the direct method with a communicative approach. As a result, many teachers have opted for eliminating the use of the L1 (in our case, Romanian and Hungarian) and translation exercises in the classroom. However, we must ask ourselves how positive this teaching strategy is for all learners. In a student-centered classroom the focus is on respect for each student's differences. Therefore, the teacher must respect, at least in theory, the different ways that students learn. And it is indeed possible for the direct method to have positive outcomes for some students. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that for generations the grammar translation method has also had positive outcomes, and this dates back to the Middle Ages (Western world).

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"If one takes a look back at the history of foreign language teaching, one can notice that there are not many issues that have raised as much controversy as the use of L1 in the classroom. Within the Grammar Translation Method, the native language played a particularly conspicuous role, and very often students learned about the target language in the source language, with translation being the most important language learning activity. As another alternative, the Direct Method nearly prohibited the use of L1, as the teacher's job was to involve students deeply in the target language, to use L2 in all situations, evidently facilitating comprehension with gestures, demonstrations or visuals. Other language learning methods of the past and the present can be situated somewhere between these two extremes, changing the focus from Teacher Talking Time (usually in the target language) to Student Talking Time (not only in the target language, but also in the mother tongue)."¹

The grammar-translation method has been consigned to oblivion, particularly in our field. In fact, with a strong focus on the direct method and the communicative approach, the use of the L1 by the student and translation exercises (into and from the foreign language) are avoided in the foreign language classroom. However, it is precisely these exercises that allow the language learner, especially in advanced stages of the acquisition/learning process, to improve language granularity, both at the lexical and grammatical level.

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¹ http://www.academia.edu/10617102/Your_mother_tongue_does_matter_Translation_in_the_Classroom_and_on_the_Web, 13.07.21.

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During The Middle Ages, European scribes translated texts in order to spread "the word of God." The main duty of many monks in monasteries was to translate Latin, Greek and even Hebrew and Arabic texts into vernacular languages (Old Spanish, Old French, etc.) for their diffusion. In this way these texts could be understood by the "common folk" who did not speak the educated languages. This was the beginning of the teaching method that today we call grammar-translation. You see, in those times the most important skills were writing skills (comprehension and written production texts had become the medium by which to spread not only religion but science and the humanities, as well. Translation into a foreign language and into one's mother tongue became common learning activities. Mastery of L1 and L2 grammar was an important aspect of the learning process.

Likewise, translation and interpretation exercises can serve to bring the student to a deeper understanding of the target language and culture, given that he/she must fully dominate linguistic elements (grammar and vocabulary) and non-linguistic elements (contexts, jokes, proverbs). The purpose of this paper is to reveal the value of translation/interpretation as an interesting tool in the teaching and learning of a foreign language.

The act of translation at the foreign language class is similar to "Cinderella" in the family of language teaching techniques, though basic language teaching methods throughout history have centered on translation and almost all language learning developed out of translation. Translation has been put into methodological storage room along with such 'odd and useless' activities as dictation, reading aloud, etc. It is considered to be something 'boring', 'pointless', 'difficult', 'irrelevant' and at last, 'uncommunicative'.² I am convinced it is so due to the fact that conventionally, the majority of English teachers associate translation activities with grammar translation as a method. Teachers have the impression, not totally without reason that:

- it is text-bound
- it is not a communicative activity (because it involves no oral interaction)
- time-consuming (not suitable for work in the classroom-because students must do the writing on their own)
- use of the mother tongue is required (but it is not desirable at the English lessons)

² Natalia Slepchenko, Krasnoyarsk Teachers' Training College #1, *Teaching translation*, at http://www.google.ro/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CCQQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Feltarea.ru%2Fpic%2Ffck%2Ffile%2Fshmidt%2Fteaching_translation.doc&ei=KyCiVdydI8q17gabuLSgCQ&usg=AFQjCNHDwkup7c8Z_uOizDCDdyYgTHaRdg&bvm=bv.97653015,d.ZGU, 21.03.20.

- it is boring – both to do, and to correct”³

This may be so, but many other approaches are possible. Translation can be introduced, purposefully, into the language learning programme.

It appears that in the classroom of the present time there is an important part to play for the mother tongue, and its fully conscious use by students, supervised by the teacher, can lead to essential advantages when it comes to the learning goals. Questions like the following seem natural to be asked:

With L1 or without it?

What is L1 in the classroom?

The researcher Luke Prodromou gives us a set of metaphors referring to the role of mother tongue in the classroom when translating. In his view, L1 can be:

1. A drug (though with therapeutic potential, it can damage your health and may become addictive);
2. a reservoir (a resource from which we draw);
3. a wall (an obstacle to teaching);
4. a window (which opens out into the world outside the classroom; if we look through it we see the students' previous learning experience, their interests, their knowledge of the world, their culture);
5. a crutch (it can help us get by in a lesson, but it is recognition of weakness);
6. a lubricant (it keeps the wheels of a lesson moving smoothly; it thus saves time)."⁴

Before thinking of any other reason, we should take into consideration a few reasons why our students take the decision of using their mother tongue at our class, despite the fact that the vast majority of teachers will constantly ask them to make an attempt at using the target language and only that. Jeremy Harmer says that learners will choose to use L1 when the given task's level is not the same (usually higher) than their own L2 level; in this case it is only natural and understandable that they wish to communicate in L1. Teachers, in Harmer's opinion should create the appropriate contexts and situations for their students to feel at ease when trying to transmit their message in the target language, or "since the teacher does not use too much TL and, consequently, Ss feel comfortable to use their mother tongue as well; finally, as there are different learning styles and abilities that allow some Ss to use the TL more easily"⁵. L. Bawcom made some serious research in the field, and found in her analysis "that in the group of learners under investigation, 36% used the mother tongue for affective factors (e.g. sense of identity, security, social interaction); 41% as a way of implementing

³ Natalia Slepchenko, Krasnoyarsk Teachers' Training College #1, Teaching translation, at http://www.google.ro/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CCQQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Feltarea.ru%2Fpic%2Ffck%2Ffile%2Fshmidt%2Fteaching_translation.doc&ei=KyCiVdydI8q17gabulsGcQ&usg=AFQjCNHDwkup7c8Z_uOizDCDdyYgTHaRdg&bvm=bv.97653015,d.ZGU

⁴ Prodromou, L. (2002) "http://www.academia.edu/10617102/Your_mother_tongue_does_matter_Translation_in_the_Classroom_and_o_n_the_WebThe Role of the Mother Tongue in the Classroom." Language Teaching Issues, 166., 02.06.2020.

⁵ Harmer, J. (2002) "Please Speak English". ELT Forum, Classroom Management, Part 4, in <http://www.eltforum.com>, 02.02. 2020.

learning strategies (e.g. checking comprehension, going over homework); for 18% of learners it was an example of expediency (e.g. translation of directions for activities and passive vocabulary), while the remaining 5% was unintelligible.”⁶

In consideration of the above, it might appear as a necessary act for teachers to direct the mother tongue use toward translation activities, in order to enhance linguistic competence of students, and to make the best of the power of mother tongue and target language use by paying more attention to linguistic exactitude.

Although a distinguished form of non-literal language, idioms may also be regarded from the figurativeness point of view. The structure and the possible restrictions in the form and use give idioms an aspect of grammaticality well defined.

”Since it is vital for EFL learners to learn English idioms in order to master English, it is important for EFL teachers to design various activities for students to use with English idioms and subsequently acquire them efficiently. Moreover, students learn better when they are provided with collaborative activities because they can interact with peers and share fun in learning. Finally, when teachers integrate listening, speaking, reading and writing activities together in teaching English idioms, students can be involved in the application of English idioms in four skills. Thus, it is effective to teach EFL learners English idiom when they are provided with various activities to practice and use English idioms in different contexts.”⁷

In his book Alan Duff highlights at least 5 reasons for using translation in the classroom:⁸

1. The unavoidable influence of our mother tongue

Each and every one of us has a mother tongue, or their first language, or the language we use as a routine, in the interpretation offered by Peter Newmark.”It shapes our way of thinking and our use of the foreign language to some extent. Translation helps us to understand better the influence of one language on the other. And, because translation involves contrast, it enables us to explore the potential of both languages-their strengths and weaknesses.”⁹

2. The necessary naturalness of the activity

Starting from the fact that we translate all the time (like it or not, outside the classroom, in the bank, at the airport, in an office, at a railway station, in a museum or gallery-whenver we are abroad), I ask the question, together with Alan Duff: Why shouldn't we translate at the class, too?

3. The aspect of skill

⁶ Bawcom, L. (2002) "Over-using L1 in the Classroom?" Modern English Teacher, 11 , 1, in Natalia Slepchenko, Krasnoyarsk Teachers' Training College #1, Teaching translation, at <http://www.google.ro/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CCQOFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2F>

⁷ <http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Wu-TeachingIdioms.html>

⁸ Alan Duff, Translation. Oxford: OUP, 1989

⁹ http://wapref.ru/referat_jgeujgotrujgyfspol.html, 10.05.15, also on <http://notedeltraduttore.net/>

Competences nowadays are vital. We tend to realize this, as even our final exam system is based on this—we test students to see how skilled they are at computer sciences, at Romanian Language, at Hungarian and at English Languages. All these competences have two faces: we are required to be able to communicate into and from these languages. Let us keep in mind that computer programming involves the knowledge of computer specific ‘languages’. It is only natural that translating at the English class is a wonderful opportunity to practice the vital skill of communicating.

4. How real language is

Teachers must be prepared to bring to class material that is as close to authenticity as possible that is as varied as possible. Our students must get in touch with the living language, we are not teaching them a dead, academic, improper or obsolete language, but one that can be used as soon as they step out of our classroom.

5. How useful it is

“As a language learning activity, translation has a lot of merits:

- It invites speculation and discussion. In translation there is hardly any ‘right’ answer, but there are a lot of wrong ones. Doing all the work individually and in writing is not necessary. Students can work in pairs or groups for oral discussion. You may choose short texts for reading and discussion to save the time.

- Translation develops three essential qualities to all language learning: accuracy, clarity and flexibility. ‘It trains the reader to search (flexibility) for the most appropriate words (accuracy) to convey what is meant (clarity)’.

- Depending on the students’ needs, and on the syllabus, the teacher can select material to illustrate particular aspects of language and structures the students have difficulty with. By working through these difficulties in the mother tongue, the students can see the link between the language (grammar) and usage.

- Translators will always be needed. Without them, there would be no summit talks, no Olympic Games, no international festivals and so on. And who is to do this work? – Either the professionals, or the students of language.

Professional translation is a specialized skill that requires specialized training. And, actually, it is not the goal we would like to achieve. The goal of translation is more like to provide learning opportunities in the process of creating translations and examination of them as final products in order to develop language awareness. Translation activities should be used in the English classroom, and they should be supported by communicative, natural learning methods.”¹⁰

To summarise, we could say that there are three types of otherness that translator/students need to handle:

- the ‘otherness’ of the original language with respect to the receptor language
- the ‘otherness’ of the message with respect to the receptor culture or cognitive environment
- the ‘otherness’ of the receptor language with respect to the original language

¹⁰ http://wapref.ru/referat_jgeujgotrujgyfspol.html, also at <http://notedeltraduttore.net/> 10.05.20.

For these types of otherness we could say

- the otherness of the original language has to be discarded
- the otherness of the message has to be maintained
- the otherness of the receptor language has to be used

In this paper we have looked at the notion of 'equivalence' when it comes to idiom translation in the hipster class, and considered whether it is an adequate criterion for translation in itself, or whether it should be supplemented with further criteria. We have argued that this is particularly necessary where differences between the original and receptor cognitive contexts make 'equivalence' unlikely or even impossible. We have argued that this situation is, in fact, relatively frequent and that translation criteria are needed to address such situations realistically. In addition to attempted equivalence, the translator must be aware of places where the 'otherness' of the message impedes his attempts at equivalence. The fact that he is trying to put aside the otherness of the original language to adopt the otherness of the receptor tongue, should not hide from him the fact that there is an otherness in the message that needs to be maintained. If he is successful, he will enable the reader to enter into the process of a self-changing dialogue with the text.

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