

The Use of Translation in the Language Classroom to Scaffold Learning

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DOI: 10.53103/cjlls.v1i1.6

Abstract

Although the use of translation has been considered detrimental in language learning owing to its interference with second language acquisition, from the first decade of 21st century onwards it has been widely favored to scaffold learning. The use of translation in the language classroom constitutes a base for understanding the second language. Particularly, due to its facilitative role in the learning process, translation can be incorporated into other activities for the improvement of target language. In addition, the cautious attitude towards the use of translation in activities makes the learning meaningful and encourages learners to become active participants, also it allows learners to compare L1 and L2 so that they can decode difficult L2 structures and elements. This paper aims to explore the effectiveness of translation in the language classroom.

Keywords: Translation, L1, L2, Language Acquisition, Language Proficiency

Introduction

While translation has been considered as a critical means to check comprehension, it has been also discouraged in the language classroom due to its negative effects on second language acquisition. For that reason, Malmkjaer (1998) states that “the issue of translation in language teaching is one on which most language teachers have a view” (p. 1). Chamot (1987) defines translation as “using the first language as a base for understanding and or producing the second language” (p. 77). Understanding the grammatical and lexical elements with the help of translation for the purpose of producing the target language more effectively, translation plays a necessary part in language teaching and learning. Although there is a widespread assumption among language teachers that second language teaching should be conducted without reference to L1, translation is very often used by learners to ensure comprehension and production of the target language. With this in mind, Naiman, Frohlich, Stern and Todesco (1978) point out the significant role of translation in language teaching and learning for learners and maintains that one of the methods widely used is to “refer back to their native language judiciously and make effective cross-lingual comparisons at different stages of language learning” (p.14). It appears that, translation is

still viewed as an essential learning strategy in foreign language instruction and learning. A growing amount of research suggested a positive role of translation in language learning (Kern, 1994; Prince, 1996; Omura, 1996). The current study attempts to explore the potential benefits of using translation in the language classroom.

Literature Review

Translation has been used in the language classroom until the beginning of the twentieth century when the Grammar-Translation Method reigned EFL contexts. There was great emphasis on the use of translation to acquire language. Richards and Rodgers (2014) describe the practice technique of Grammar-Translation Method as “the detailed analysis of grammar rules, followed by application of this knowledge to the task of translating sentences and texts into and out of target language” (p.5). However, after the Direct and Audio-lingual methods emerged there was a shift from reading to learning; thus, the use of translation was disfavored. Moreover, it was believed that translation could cause more harm than good; as a result, L2 was favored as a medium of instruction in the language classroom. Also, translation was not able to help learners become proficient at speaking; hence, it was no longer considered as a useful approach to be implemented in language learning.

Although the use of translation has never been totally removed, it has been ignored and has not occupied much space in language learning (Cook, 2010). Howatt (1984) notes that translation was used in language learning to scaffold learners when they encountered some difficulties. The methods such as The Silent Way, Suggestopedia, and Total Physical Response which emerged after the Grammar Translation Method took a cautious attitude towards the use of translation. These methods did not employ translation as a method for practicing. However, translation was used to give instructions in the initial stages of learning. As learners had an opportunity to bridge from known to unknown, the implementation of translation was useful for them to facilitate the learning process (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2015).

After the first decade of 21st century, the use of translation has been favored again in the language classroom. Although there were some voices against it, the use of translation was not seriously criticized. The recognition of bilingualism and multilingualism caused a change towards embracing translation in language education. One of the major arguments against translation was its limiting exposure to the target language; therefore, language learners did not have enough opportunity to practice L2. In other words, when translation is used learners did not receive enough L2 input to enable them for language development. Also, it was believed that too much reliance on translation might hinder communicative competence of learners. Cook (2010) considers the use of translation as detrimental to fluency and the development of target language. It is thought that learners need to think in L2 to enhance their communication. This idea is based on the

premise that translation has a negative role on the pace of communication as it hinders learners from thinking in the foreign language (Malmkjaer, 1998). It goes without saying that sufficient exposure to target language holds a significant place in language learning as learners stand a better chance of acquiring language through meaning-making (Vygotsky, 1986). The exposure to large amount of comprehensible input helps learners understand, retain and apply what they have learned (Long, 1981; Swain, 1995). Furthermore, the cautious attitude towards the use of translation in activities makes the learning meaningful and encourages learners to become active participants (Mart, 2013a). Even though translation is identified as detrimental and pointless in the language classroom, it allows learners to compare L1 and L2; thus, they can decode difficult L2 structures and elements (Danchev, 1983) which will help learners to achieve better learning outcomes. In addition, such concepts as meaningful learning, learner autonomy, learner-centeredness, and peer-work which are at the core of Communicative Approach are also relevant to translation-based language teaching (Gonzales-Davies, 2004). It is crucial that learners are directed to work in pairs after texts and compare their answers. The potential value of group work in which peers provide each other explanations in the mother tongue helps learners promote their vocabulary and grammatical knowledge. In doing so, learners ultimately feel secure and endeavor to construct a bridge between familiar and unfamiliar for the purpose of using the language. Gonzales-Davies maintains that assignments are to be designed to enable learners to develop competencies. It is important to note that classroom teaching and activities also need to be designed to improve language skills of learners.

Translation is thought to impede the development of learners' language skills, however, when translation is incorporated into other activities, it can contribute to the improvement of target language. Duff (1989) notes that "translation need not be done in isolation". Malmkjaer (1998) stresses the link between language skills and translation and maintains that translation "in fact dependent on and inclusive of them, and language students who are translating will be forced to practice them" (p.8).

The Direct-Method emphasizes that learners should think in the target language to become fluent speakers. When the Direct Method is employed in the language classroom in which classroom instruction and classroom activities are carried out in the target language, learners stand a better chance of involving in using L2. In addition, the implementation of conversational activities and using language in real contexts enables learners to think and speak in the target language effectively. However, language development does not occur without grammar and vocabulary knowledge (Mart, 2012) and in a learning environment in which only L2 is spoken learners cannot easily develop their language knowledge. For that reason, the use of translation can enable learners grasp how target language works. As Chellapan (1982) puts it "translation can make the student come to closer grips with the target language. A simultaneous awareness of two media could actually make the student see the points of convergence and divergence more clearly and

also refine the tools of perception and analysis resulting in divergent thinking” (p. 60). The implementation of methods that includes using visuals, gestures and mimes to teach vocabulary and grammar might lead to ambiguity. If learning remains unclear, learners might experience confusion and frustration which are considered as negative factors to impede their learning process. Similarly, the lack of understanding of reading and listening texts prevents learners from coming to good terms with grammatical structures and lexical unites. Needless to say, listening and reading texts offer a fruitful venue to experience good language models. However, learners cannot become cognizant of linguistic features if they do not understand the texts. Furthermore, it should be borne in mind that providing learners instructions and explanations by means of translation can lead them to do activities effectively which will result in better learning. Presumably, the use of translation is a preferred learning strategy for most learners. The judicious use of translation might be a good idea to affect learners’ chances of success. For example, in some cases giving instructions to learners in their language might be a positive reinforcement to improve learning.

Language learners have a tendency to compare their mother tongue with the target language they are learning because “learners draw on the patterns of other languages as they try to discover the complexities of the new language they are learning” (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p. 570). The L1 and L2 connection is a natural fact of language learning; thus, it cannot be totally removed from the language classroom. Duff (1996) about the use of translation in language learning states that “translation helps us to understand better the influence of the one language on the other, and to correct errors of habit that creep in unnoticed” (p.6). Within this context, translation should be used where necessary (Weschler, 1997).

Translation is a useful tool in the language classroom to develop three essential qualities: accuracy, clarity and flexibility (Duff, 1996). Language learners need to have a sense of security while learning. A total restriction on the use of translation in the learning environment can not only cause anxiety but also hinder participation; in this case, the use of translation for accuracy and clarity will allow learners to feel more secure and encourage them to display more motivation for learning and take more chances as well (Mart, 2013b). It is important to stress that learning occurs in a relaxed setting. Furthermore, translation can help learners elicit language, check comprehension, cooperate with other learners, and understand instructions better (Atkinson, 1987).

Cook (2001, p. 413) suggests some important factors about the use of L1 in language teaching and learning:

Efficiency; if the use of L1 will increase the effectiveness of L2 learning then it should not be ignored.

Learning; if the use of L1 greatly contributes to the achievement of L2 then it can be used.

Naturalness; if learners will feel more comfortable when L1 is cautiously used then L1 cannot be neglected.

External relevance; if the use of both L1 and L2 help learners with better learning then L1 in the language classroom cannot be banned.

The efficacy of translation in the foreign language classroom can complement L2 learning. It is a time-efficient tool to teach learners grammar and vocabulary. In addition, the use of translation has a supportive role in increasing language awareness. When language learners become aware of how language is used or how language operates, their sense of achievement is increased. It is stated that the use of L1 has clear advantages in language learning; for that reason, a total neglect of it might hinder the development of learners. It is possible to claim that learners will feel comfortable when L1 is used in the language classroom as they will understand the topics better.

Conclusion

Despite the widespread assumption that L2 should be taught without reference to L1, the use of mother tongue has occupied much space in the language classroom. Although current approaches in language teaching contributed to the demise of translation in the EFL context, its judicious use gives learners a greater sense of attainment and accomplishment. It is obvious that the excessive dependency of translation in the language classroom should be avoided; otherwise, learners begin to feel that they do not understand language items unless their translations are provided. Learners can improve their language learning better if they learn in a relaxed atmosphere. The use of L1 in the language classroom can provide a stress free environment. A cautious attitude towards L1 can greatly help learners with better language development. Learners involve in other activities easily if they understand what to do. In other words, translation can help them grasp the target language more easily. Also, language learners have a tendency to compare target language with their mother tongue; hence the incorporation of translation in classroom instruction will facilitate the learning process.

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