

YOUR MOTHER TONGUE DOES MATTER!
TRANSLATION IN THE CLASSROOM AND ON THE WEB [1]

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Introduction

Looking back at the history of foreign language teaching, one can notice that there are few issues that have raised as much controversy as the use of L1 in the classroom. Within the Grammar Translation Method, the mother tongue played an extremely prominent role, and very often students learned about the target language in the source language, with translation being the most important language learning activity. On the other hand, the Direct Method almost forbade the use of L1, as the teacher's job was to immerse students in the target language, to use L2 in all situations, obviously, 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, shifting 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).

It seems that in the contemporary classroom there is an important role to play for the mother tongue, and its conscious use by students, orchestrated by the teacher, can lead to significant benefits in terms of the learning goals. In this context, the present article will be devoted to the issue of translation and its computer applications as part and parcel of the teaching process.

With L1 or without it?

What is L1 in the classroom? Prodromou (2002) provides a set of metaphors illustrating the meaning of the mother tongue in the language classroom. According to him, L1 is:

- "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)."

To start with, one could consider some of the reasons why learners decide to use L1 in the classroom, despite the teacher's efforts to encourage them to communicate in the target language only. Harmer (2002) claims that very often learners resort to the mother tongue when the choice of task is not compatible with their L2 level; as it is natural for them to use L1 to communicate, while the teacher does not create situations that would make it natural for them to use English; 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. Bawcom (2002), in her study on using L1 in the classroom, found out 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 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.

In the light of the above, it seems necessary for teachers to channel the mother tongue use into translation activities, helping to improve linguistic competence of students, and exploiting the power of mother tongue and target language use by drawing greater attention to linguistic accuracy.

Translation in a foreign language classroom

Translation is a complex process, and especially some of its aspects needs to be highlighted at the moment. Meaning is paramount, and the translation should accurately reflect the meaning of the original. Moreover, it is the form which should also correspond, of course, often it needs to be translated as well. The register and style are to be retained, with the translator not influencing the meaning by often unintentional choice of language structures. What is more, the influence of the source language, especially in the area of translating idioms and collocations, has to be controlled and limited.

Despite strong arguments for not using L1 in the language classroom (see Atkinson, 1993, Duff, 1989: 5), translation can be a vital resource for a language class, since its limited use can have a powerfully positive effect on many learners, especially if their previous experience has had very

little L2 use and they have to be introduced gradually to the target language environment. Also, as Deller (2003) adds, the mother tongue should be used as a resource to notice differences and similarities between the two languages; to let learners develop and produce their own materials, including their own tests; to encourage spontaneity and fluency; to have a beneficial effect on group dynamics and to receive ongoing and meaningful feedback from learners. Duff (1989) adds that translation helps to better understand the influence of one language on the other, it is natural for people to translate in real life, translation activities invite speculation, discussion and evaluation of answers (of which there are rarely 'right' and 'wrong' ones), finally, help develop accuracy, clarity and flexibility of expression in the language. Finally, providing the rationale for the introduction of translation into the teaching process, Owen (2003) says that it is useful to increase learner awareness, not only of grammar but also of the pragmatic and stylistic devices and their effects. In this way, learners are empowered with a fuller understanding of what the L2 is capable of, in what ways it is similar to, or different from, their own language. Rather than an obstacle to real language use, translation might be viewed as a way of fine-tuning the language to be used in given situations and conditions.

In order to make a translation activity a purposeful element of a language lesson, there are some necessary precautions to be taken (after Duff, 1989: 9):

- all students should be equally involved in the task;
- the activities ought to contain as much oral translation as possible, with writing to be used as individual follow-up;
- the material needs to be short and varied, with longer texts reserved for out-of-class work on higher levels of learning;
- there must be time-limits set, in order to prevent students from getting stuck and to allow the time for discussion and feedback.

Translation opportunities on the Net

Nowadays, language learners, be it children, teenagers or adults, are more than likely to have contact with the target language out of class when surfing the Web. Thus, what they need to be provided with is a set of language tools that would help them make the meaning out if they desperately need it. For that purpose, one of many online translation services can be used, which take the message typed in, connect to an online dictionary site and produce a translated version. Of course, what learners must be made aware of (for instance, in a sample in-class activity) is that such online machine translators will not produce a perfectly accurate text, but rather come up with a piece of language that will allow a learner to make out the meaning on their own. Thus, they cannot serve as models for language work or as suitable homework help, and must be subject to human polishing in order to produce a text of satisfactory quality. When the source language and the target language are as substantially different as English and Polish, a machine-

translated text may produce the output which is barely comprehensible, with problems of inflections, multiple meanings, idioms and multi-word constructions. On the other hand, such rough output can be useful to give students practice in editing, correcting, deciding on appropriate lexis use or inflections choice, which can be demonstrated in the activities given below.

The examples of services translating English-Polish or Polish-English are Poltran (<http://www.poltran.com/>) or Foreignword (<http://www.foreignword.com/LTools/TransNow/Polish/transnow.htm>). On the other hand, with students learning two foreign languages such as English and German, French or Spanish, there are a number of other services providing automatic translation within these language pairs: Altavista's Babel Fish translator (<http://world.altavista.com/>); Dictionary.com, (<http://dictionary.reference.com/translate/text.html>); Free Translation (<http://www.freetranslation.com/>); WorldLingo (http://www.worldlingo.com/products_services/worldlingo_translator.html) or iTools (<http://www.itools.com/lang/>). For even more links to similar services, go to <http://www.humanitas-international.org/newstran/more-translators.htm>.

At the same time, the services provided above allow users to translate not only individual words, sentences or blocks of text, but also entire websites. This can be done by going to one of the services given above (Babel Fish, Dictionary.com, Free Translation, World Lingo or iTools), finding a "Translate a Web page" box (or similar), typing the URL of the page one wants to translate, selecting the from and to languages and pressing "Translate". In order to facilitate the process, it is advisable to have two windows of the Internet browser open, go to a translation service in one and the page to be translated in the other, then copy the URL of the page and paste it to the translation service. Another reason why both the source page and the target page should be open is that due to the fact that the translation is automatic, non-contextual and prone to grammatical inaccuracy, there may be the need for the source text to be used as reference in order to make the meaning out.

T-Sail (<http://www.t-mail.com/cgi-bin/tsail>) is a service which performs the same function of letting surfers view websites in the language of their choice, machine-translated from a source language to a target language, however, without the need to use two windows to translate the page with the help of some online translator. When going to the page <http://www.t-mail.com/cgi-bin/tsail> (or <http://www.t-mail.com> and clicking "T-Sail"), one types the starting page in the "Start Sail'n at" box, then chooses a language combination from the drop-down box below, finally presses "T-Sail". The page will be machine-translated, and then the user can click links on the translated page with the next pages also automatically machine-translated. Of course, it must be kept in mind that since the process demands connecting to a translation service, processing the website and giving back the result, it can take a while to have a page translated.

Adding translation opportunities to a website is another possibility for enriching the language classroom (see, for instance, Altavista's Babel Fish at <http://world.altavista.com/> and click "Add Babel Fish translation to your site" at the bottom of the page, but NOT "Add translation to your personal or business site" on the right). Thanks to that, surfers visiting the website can translate passages of text or entire websites among many languages without the need to connect to an online translation service. Another functionality is that users are able to translate the webpage visited with just one click. In order to enable that, one should copy a code given on the page (<http://world.altavista.com>, then "Add Babel Fish translation to your site", or directly at http://www.altavista.com/help/free/free_searchbox_transl), open the class website in a webpage editor, add a code, save the page and upload it to the server.

Translating emails is another language opportunity provided on the Web (e.g., WorldLingo's http://www.worldlingo.com/products_services/email_translation.html), which enables one to send and receive email messages (in this case, in 12 languages with Polish, unfortunately, not being one of them). Thus, to test the service and have one's email message translated from English to, for instance, Chinese, Dutch, German, Greek or Italian, go to http://www.worldlingo.com/products_services/email_translation.html; type in the relevant fields in the form provided (your name, email and language, recipient's name, email and language, subject and message), finally, click "Send". In order to evaluate the translation capacity, it is advisable to send an email from one email address to the other the teacher has.

A similar email translation service is T-Mail E-Mail (go to <http://www.t-mail.com>, then click "T-Mail" again). This is a standard Web-based email service, which provides users with free-of-charge email accounts accessible on the Web after inputting the login and the password, however, apart from sending mail one can choose the language the message will be translated to and sent to a recipient. Thus, to use the service, go to <http://www.t-mail.com/index2.shtml> (or <http://www.t-mail.com> and then click "T-Mail"), click "Registered Users: Login" if you have already set the account up, then log in with your login and password; or click "New Users: T-Mail" to register for this free service. Once logged in, create a message, put in the addressee, then choose the target language and the source language. A good thing to do is to include your own email address in the "Cc:" field (Carbon Copy – send a copy to somebody else), so that you could see the translated output as it goes to the addressee.

Going one step further, learners practising other languages through English could use the opportunity of machine-translated chat. In this case, a user enters a real-time language translating chatroom, and can have their message translated to the language that other user/s speak in the chatroom (see Babelchat, <http://www.babelchat.com> or Word2Word Translating Chat, <http://www.word2word.com/word.html> or <http://www.word2word.com> and then choose "Word2Word Translating Chat" in the box and click "Take Me To"). In the latter case, on entering the chatroom by clicking either of the two chat entrances, one needs to adjust the

language selection at the bottom of the chat window to the language being used in typing, as well as the language selection at the top of the chat window to the target language. Both languages will be seen in the chat history box.

Many Internet users communicate with each other with the help of Internet communicators, known also as instant messaging systems or messenger services (ICQ, AIM, MSN Messenger or Yahoo! Messenger, to quote just a few). Chatting with these can be facilitated by IM Translator (<http://www.paralink.com/ims/index.html>), a free-of-charge tool providing instant translation of messages and other texts while chatting with speakers of other languages. What is important is that the program performs both the function of a chat tool and a translation tool. Thus, after having downloaded and installed it, one needs to type a message and choose a language to be translated to, or, on the contrary, choose a message other chat users uttered to be translated to one's mother tongue (or the language one finds easier to understand).

10 language activities with online translation tools

What follows is the outline of ten language activities focusing on translation and using online translation tools. The main purpose of these is to give students the idea of the possibilities and limitations of machine translation, to make them notice similarities and differences between the mother tongue and the target language, finally, to encourage them to use language editing and polishing to improve the quality of their messages.

1. Take a coursebook text from the previous lesson, ask groups of students to translate it to Polish. Then have them use a translation service to do the same. After that, students compare the two translations, paying special attention to the proper use of selected grammatical structures.
2. Write a text in Polish based on the previous coursebook lesson/text, which will use the same vocabulary, however, in different sentence structures. Print the text out for students, then go to one of Polish-English translation services, paste the text and have it translated. Then give the result to groups of students, ask them to try and retranslate it back to Polish. Finally, give the source text, have students find differences between the two versions and discuss the differences with the whole class, drawing students' attention to the typical mistakes made by the program or the students.
3. Ask students to copy a short text in English from the coursebook to a translation service. Then they use the service to translate it into Polish. After that, students copy the result as it is and paste it again to the same translation service and make it translate it into English. Finally, students in pairs or groups compare the original text and the result of the retranslation, drawing conclusions on the differences, later to be discussed with the whole class.

4. Provide students with a text in Polish. Divide them into pairs and have each pair use one of the Polish-English services. Have students translate the same text in different services, then ask them to get into bigger groups and find differences between the two translations. Finally, get the whole class to exchange ideas and reflect on the problems encountered.
5. Give students a fairly easy text in Polish. Ask them to translate it, using all the resources they can (especially dictionaries). Once finished, have them use one of the Polish-English services to translate the same text. Then have them compare the translations, trying to find strong and weak points of both the computer and the student.
6. Write a text in Polish based on the language of the recent lessons. Then ask a teacher of another language taught at school (e.g., German, French, Spanish or Italian) to translate the text for you into this language. Then give both texts to pairs of students, and have them use different translation services to get the English translation from Polish and from some other language. Compare both translations, find differences and draw conclusions on the language differences between pairs of different languages.
7. Take the English texts, translate them into Polish using a machine translation tool. Have students compare the source and the target text and find true friends (words that have similar form and meaning in both languages) and false friends (words with similar form but differences in meaning). Make sure students learn them.
8. Take an English text with the words students have recently learnt (it is important that words be polysemous). Use the online translator to get the text into Polish, then copy the result to a word processor and highlight the polysemous words. Ask students to consider if they are correct, and, if necessary, provide the appropriate words. Let them consult the source text when in need.
9. Write a text in English, rich in phrasal verbs, idioms, prepositional phrases ('at first') and verb+particle phrases ('beware of'). Use a translation tool to get the target text in Polish. Before giving it to students, polish the translation so that it is only the translation of idiomatic phrases mentioned above that is imperfect. Then divide students into pairs, where one person is to reconstruct the original English phrases, while the other – come up with a 'more Polish' expression. After that, have students get together and compare the phrases.
10. Provide students with a text in Polish based on the recent language material. Then have them translate it into English, take the result from English and translate it to French, take the result from French and translate it back into English and finally the result from English back to Polish. Ask learners to compare the source Polish text and the target Polish text to see which elements remain unchanged, which, on the other hand, had meaning distorted.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it has to be kept in mind that translation has different layers, and depending on the language level students can work either on decoding the meaning of individual words or structures, mastering the language by finding synonyms, trying to paraphrase or explain concepts descriptively, or, perhaps, getting deeper into the essence of whole sentences and paragraphs. This, as Naimushin (2002) claims, is culminated with the moment when learners realize there will always be words and expressions they do not know but this cannot be an obstacle to successful communication, and that translation is not about word-by-word rendering of the original message in the target language but is communication-oriented, and with the equivalence of the entire message supreme to the equivalence of its segments.

Note

This article is dedicated to the fond memory of an excellent translator and interpreter, Pawel Wieclawski, my lifelong friend, who died tragically in a car crash on August 14th, 2004. I am grateful to him for a lot of advice on the ideas and sites presented in this paper.

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