



A critical approach on translation as a learning activity in FL (Foreign Language) classes

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Abstract ;

One of the main issues addressed in the field of Translation Studies regards the usefulness of translation as a learning activity in language classes. Indeed, the use of translation has been perceived differently and it has been the object of criticism and controversy in foreign language teaching. The present paper aims at investigating the contribution of translation as a pedagogical tool in foreign language classes by suggesting that there is a strong relationship between translation and foreign language learning in the sense that it helps learners acquire, develop and further strengthen their knowledge and competences in a foreign language. After providing readers with a description of translation as a multidimensional activity, a main distinction is made between three types of teaching activities which all involve translation but they are used in different contexts: language teaching, translation teaching and translator training. Afterwards, the present research focuses on the basic arguments for and against the use of translation in language teaching, followed by some proposals so that translation can be effectively incorporated into a foreign language class. The main conclusion is that translation should be thought of as a challenging, supporting and creative learning activity to foreign language learning that would help students to further develop their language competences.

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1. Introduction

In today's multilingual and multicultural environment, more and more emphasis is laid upon the role of foreign languages learning in overcoming language barriers and promoting communication across the world. To this context, there has been a long tradition to incorporate translation as a learning activity in teaching foreign languages, although, through recent years there has been some reconsideration of the contribution of translation in the language classroom. Before we present the arguments for and against the use of translation as a learning activity in teaching foreign languages, we will briefly discuss the multidimensional concept of translation and its basic characteristics.

2. What is translation

Translation has been one of the most important human activities through the centuries playing a very important role in today's globalized world and in a multilingual environment where it is used on a daily basis. Indeed, it is one of the most ancient activities dating back to the spread of different languages across the world and closely related to the human need for communication. A very important characteristic of this notion is its multidisciplinary nature that allows to

recognize translation as “a multi-faceted activity [where] there is room for a variety of perspectives” (Hatim, 2001: 10).

The concept of translation itself, is a rather complex one, although it seems a straightforward concept to define as an activity aiming to replace the lexical and syntactical elements from one language to another. Catford (1965: 20) defines translation accordingly as “the replacement of textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent textual material in another language”. However, this simplified definition stresses the linguistic aspect of translation without taking into account a number of other factors affecting the translation process. Translation is actually a very complex activity although it is often seen as a merely mechanic linguistic activity aimed at replacing lexical and morpho-syntactic elements from one language to another. The Dictionary of Translation Studies (Shuttleworth & Cowie, 1997: 181) provides a multidimensional definition of translation, according to which, translation is “an incredibly broad notice which can be understood in many different ways. For example, one may talk of translation as a process or a product, and identify such sub-types as literary translation, technical translation, subtitling and machine

translation; moreover, while typically it just refers to the transfer of written texts, the term sometimes also includes interpreting". Toury (1995) perceives translation as a series of messages entailed in a given linguistico-cultural system and regulated by norms that allow a community to either import or export their culture. Crystal (1987: 344) also introduces the notion of meaning in defining translation as follows: "the neutral term used for all tasks where the meaning of expressions in one language is turned into the meaning of another whether the medium is spoken, written or signed". Apart from the notions of "message" and "meaning" which are closely related to the concept of translation, translation is also seen as a mediating activity between different cultures that examines culture-bound terms and references in the transposition of a text from one language to another. Katan (1999: 66) perceives the role of the translator as an active cultural mediator who needs to possess among other capabilities a conscious understanding of cultures.

In addition, Hatim & Mason (2004) support that the perfect translation does not exist but there can be many different acceptable translations of the same text based on different and subjective interpretations of a text. The acknowledgement of the degree

of subjectivity of translation in the field of Translation Studies has certain pedagogical implications for the translation activity as a tool in teaching foreign languages. This implies that teachers should not be viewed as those providing the perfect version and, therefore, they should encourage students provide several different versions as long as they comply with the purpose and function of the source text.

3. Distinction between translation activity in foreign language learning, translation teaching and translator training

An important distinction regarding the role of translation as a pedagogical tool is that made by Schjoldager (2004: 129) who distinguishes between three kinds of teaching activities which all involve translation, but used in different context: language teaching, translation teaching and translator training.

- Translation as a pedagogical tool in language teaching is mainly viewed as a means of teaching and testing proficiency in L1. Indeed, many tests and exams usually contain a component of translation aiming to test students' proficiency in L2.
- Translation may also be taught as a separate component in a language programme where it is still used as a testing instrument of students' proficiency but, mainly, since it constitutes a separate

component, it is taught as an end in itself. Translation as a separate component is usually taught at academic level, where the overall objective is to improve students' translation skill and it is also used as a testing instrument of students' proficiency in L2.

- Finally, translation activity is used in translator training programs for professional purposes aiming to train authorized translators. In this case, language teaching is not the main concern, although such programs may involve some kind of language teaching, as well. Within this context, Gonzáles-Davies (2002: 65) distinguishes between translation "as a communicative learning activity" used in FL classes and translation as purpose aiming "to prepare students who wish to follow Translation and Interpreting studies at university.

4. Past and current practices on language teaching

The present paper will focus on the use of translation in language teaching by, first, mentioning briefly the most important past and current practices on language teaching. The "grammar-translation method" seems to have dominated pre-20th century theoretical approach on language teaching (Leonardi, 2010). The basic idea of this method is that foreign language teaching

should be based on grammar rules and vocabulary learning, and also the translation of isolated sentences that should be constructed, according to Richards & Rodgers (1986: 2), in such a way as to illustrate grammatical aspects of the language. Furthermore, oral skills were not taught at all and, finally, the language of instruction was the students' native language, known as L1 (Language 1).

In the mid- and late 19th century, the theoretical approach toward language teaching changed: grammar should be taught inductively and not by memorizing grammar rules, the language of instruction should be L2 (Language 2) and emphasis should be placed on oral skills. As far as vocabulary is concerned, it should be learnt within texts, and not in isolated sentences and, consequently, translation should be avoided. To this context, translation activities were considered to be inappropriate within foreign language learning (Lado, 1964; Beardsmore, 1982; Brown, 2002).

The "Grammar-Translation" method was criticized in favor of other teaching approaches that disapproved of the use of translation and supported the use of more natural and communicative approaches toward language learning. The reaction to the "Grammar-Translation Method" paved

the way to the “Direct Method”, the most popular of the natural methods according to which, L2 should be learnt in a natural way similar to L1 learning and without any interference of L1 (Cook, 1998: 118). More specifically, students practice their skills in realistic situations by thinking in their target language, and not in their native language. Within this context, translation is viewed as one of the main causes of negative language interference from L1 to L2 and, therefore, it is not used at all as a pedagogical instrument. However, the Direct Method method has also been the subject of criticism since it required native or near-native teachers and took for granted that all teachers were proficient enough in teaching foreign languages.

The current approaches to language teaching are related to the ‘Direct-Method’, the most well-known of the so-called natural methods which suggests that the teaching of the foreign language be taught without any interferences and reference to mother tongue. The main idea behind this method is that foreign language learning should be similar to natural native language learning, which means that translation is seen as unsuitable within the context of foreign language learning and, therefore, condemned as a pedagogical tool.

However, since the “Direct-method” has been criticized as overemphasizing similarities between natural L1 learning and classroom L2 learning, the role of translation in learning L2 is reconsidered as well as the exclusive use of L2 in the learning process. As Malmkjaer (1998: 1) stresses, there have been significant signs of efforts made for the revival of translation in language teaching where it is not seen as a harmful tool in language learning but as a means to improve students’ various competences and performance. This approach makes use of translation in context, that is, authentic texts are used that are related to a larger framework of reference that helps students to take decisions concerning lexico-grammatical strategies to adopt in order to solve translation difficulties and problems.

To this context, translation becomes a purposeful activity and an important communication tool that is bound to the context it occurs. Nord (1997) stresses the cultural nature of translation by mentioning the following: “Situations are not universal but are embedded in a cultural habitat, which in turn conditions the situation. Language is thus to be regarded as part of culture. And communication is conditioned by the constraints of the situation-in-culture”. The purpose of this paper is to

show that pedagogical translation can be used as a successful tool that can enhance students' language skills and also their cultural and social competences.

5. Criticism against the use of translation in FL classes and counterarguments in favor of translation as a learning activity

There have been significant arguments addressed against the use of translation in FL classes that could be summarized as follows (Malmkjaer: 1998: 6):

- Translation as a pedagogical tool in EFL is a source of interference from Language 1 to Language 2

Translation as a learning activity entails a certain degree of interference of L1 which, however, could be seen as a positive effect toward improving students' competence in L2 development.

Two basic arguments that have been addressed regarding the concept of interference are the following: first of all, it is believed that it strengthens interference of L1 which is described as negative transfer from L1 to L2. Gatenby (1967: 2) characterizes this type of interference as "bad pedagogy" that forces students to think in L1 whereas they should be able to use L2 without having to think in L1. In addition, it is believed that the use of translation as a pedagogical tool leads toward misconceptions regarding the

notion of language. Lado (1964: 53) mentions that when students are asked to translate word-for-word from L1 to L2, they produce incorrect language. Similarly, Coleman (1986: 102) adds that translation into L2 is harmful to students' linguistic competence development by leading to a persistence with the individual word and to the perception that the only correct translation is the direct one. However, Nigel J. Ross () are opposed to this attitude and they talk about the usefulness of translation in comparing grammar, syntax, vocabulary, word order and other language differences between a foreign language and the students' mother tongue. Consequently, the process of translation actually helps toward controlling interference through a contrastive analysis between Language 1 and Language 2. t

- Translation does not contribute to the development of the basic skills of foreign language competence

Another important point of criticism is that translation does not contribute to the four basic skills development that make up language competence which are the following: listening, reading, writing and speaking. Indeed, translation is viewed as cut-off and radically different from these skills that are traditionally used to test language competence.

However, according to Leonardi (2010), translation does not involve a simple transference from one language to another; on the contrary, it is a very complex process entailing among other activities reading, writing, speaking and listening.

As far as the reading activity is concerned, it is closely related to the process of translation since the source text should be read carefully and analytically before starting translating. In fact, text analysis through careful reading of the source text is a basic step in order to avoid misinterpretation of the meaning and message of the text.

Translation is also related to writing since by its very definition translation is a written transposition of a text from one language to another and, therefore, translators need to have good writing skills in order to perform well in their work. Writing skills are not only taught in foreign language courses but also in translation courses where there is the need to refer to matters such as organization of the text, style and writing conventions. Furthermore, from a contrastive approach in translation classes, students have the opportunity to compare and contrast writing styles in different languages and also to develop their writing skills through written commentaries providing them with the opportunity to

comment on the translation difficulties they encountered as well as the techniques they applied in order to handle them.

Besides reading and writing skills, translation contributes to the development of students' oral skills. since, Nord (1997) defines it "a communicative activity practiced within a meaningful activity". Indeed, translation establishes an important interaction between the teacher and students in order to discuss matters related to the translation process such as translation problems and difficulties they encountered during the act of translating. This interaction can take place in the foreign language class in order to help students strengthen their oral skills in the same way that students practise these skills in a traditional foreign language course.

- Translation as a pedagogical tool in EFL is insufficient and a waste of time for language learning

Gatenby (1967: 70) believes that the objective of a language course is to improve students' proficiency in L2, a goal that is not accomplished by using translation which is totally different from language practice. To this sense, translation is a time-consuming activity that should not be used a learning instrument in L2 learning.

However, as seen above, translation helps students to develop their reading, writing, speaking and listening activity at the same time and, therefore, it is not a waste of time since it allows them to improve all their skills at once. Therefore, it is suggested that students work on a short text in class and be assigned longer texts as homework so as not to waste their learning time. In addition, students could be asked to write commentaries on the difficulties they have encountered and discuss them afterwards in class in the target language so that they further practise their oral skills.

- Translation leads students to the belief that words and expressions between two languages correspond one-to-one

This criticism does not concern the process of translation only, since students have the tendency to refer to their mother tongue when learning a foreign language, as well. On the contrary, translation helps students realize that ideas and concepts, both linguistic and cultural, are expressed differently in two languages and thus to learn by their mistakes.

Furthermore, translation can help them use dictionaries and understand the difference between monolingual and bilingual dictionaries. The role of translation in this respect is significant since there is a widespread belief in foreign language

courses that students simply need a monolingual dictionary to search for unknown words without being given the right instructions of how to use this pedagogical instrument.

- Translation is an unnatural activity

The belief that translation is not a natural activity is rejected by theoreticians such as Malmkjaer (ibid) who stresses the naturalness of translation as an activity that helps people communicate between two languages and switch from one language to another that is very natural in its purpose. On the other hand, it is not natural to ask students who learn a foreign language not to use their own mother tongue since there is a cognitive activity involved that calls for translation into their native language. Therefore, translation is an innate natural occurring activity and, as such, a foreign language cannot be learnt without comparing it to one's own native language.

- Translation is a pedagogical instrument only used for translator training

Another point of criticism regarding the role of translation as a pedagogical tool is that it is appropriate only for translator training programs. This argument is doubtful since translation used in a foreign language class can help students develop several different skills such as their analytic ability as well as their ability to use

different strategies for problem-solving and, mostly, their creativity. All these skills are of great value since they can also be useful in their every-day activities.

6. Perspectives of translation as a pedagogical tool in foreign language classes

One of the basic matters that need to be discussed in designing translation activities in a foreign language classroom regards the type of texts to be used as a translation activity. There are certain criteria suggested so that translation can be effectively and successfully incorporated into a foreign language class. These criteria can serve as guidelines for teachers to select the appropriate material for their teaching approach (Leonardi, 2010: 87):

- Students' proficiency level
- Direction of translation, from Language 1 to Language 2 or vice versa
- Focus on one or more language skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening)
- School vs University or professional courses teaching requirements
- General vs specialized language requirements
- Time availability
- Small vs large classes

Regarding the methodology in teaching translation in foreign language classes, it could bear certain features such as:

- Authenticity (Kelly, 2005)

This notion refers both to language material and to the activities and methods to be used for practice in the classroom. By the terms "authenticity" we mean "a term which loosely implies as close as approximation as possible to the world outside the classroom", implying the use of translation in the foreign language classroom as a realistic activity that takes place every day outside the classroom. There are certain advantages of using authentic material for translation in foreign language classes that can be summarized as follows:

- Authentic material brings students into direct contact with reality
- The vocabulary used is original and authentic
- The language structure is authentic and not artificial which means that students are not exposed to artificially constructed language features

On the contrary, simplified texts are artificially constructed pointing to specific pedagogical uses and language structures that do not correspond to the natural use of the foreign language. Apart from authenticity, it is proposed that teachers select shorter versions in class and assign the full version as homework which can be discussed afterwards in class. It is worth

mentioning that these short versions must not be adapted or manipulated in any way so that they retain their authenticity as a basic feature of the learning material.

- Student-centered approach

The use of authentic texts for translation would certainly motivate students to participate more actively in the learning process. Translation as a learning activity itself is a student-centered approach since students adopt a central role in translation assignment, whereas, the teacher's role is that of the guide and facilitator. According to Kiraly (2000), translation activity by nature promotes collaborative learning since it involves teamwork that can prove to be beneficial in terms of problem-solving activities. Translation is also a social activity (Pym: 1992: 152-3) that provides learners with the opportunity to develop their social skills through collaboration, a series of discussions and negotiations during the process of translating. Furthermore, it needs to be stressed from the beginning of the translation assignment that the teachers' translated version is not the only acceptable and that the "perfect" translation does not exist since there can be several different versions all, of which could be acceptable and of high quality. Students, therefore, should be motivated to participate in the

translation activity without fearing of translation errors or of producing "bad" or "wrong" translations.

- The inclusion of the cultural component in translation texts

It is widely acceptable in the field of Translation Studies {(Bassnett, 1990), (Katan, 1990), (Venuti, 1995)} that the act of translation is perceived as that of cultural transformation and, therefore, the translator is viewed as a mediator among cultures implying a conscious understanding not only of languages but of cultures as well. Apart from fluency acquisition in foreign language classes, students should also be taught about cultures in order to avoid the risk of failing in their communication and creating misunderstanding. Although vocabulary, grammar and syntax can be easily learnt and correctly employed by foreign language learners, appropriate use of cultural references in specific situations is a totally different matter. The role of translation as a pedagogical tool in foreign language classes can help students improve their understanding of culture-bound terms and traditions, through a contrastive approach to teaching where students will practice their ability to find a culturally equivalent and appropriate term or expression from their native to the foreign

language. Consequently, translation activities in foreign language classes acquire a distinct position by contributing toward cultural competence development that would allow learners to successfully communicate with people coming from different cultural backgrounds. It is, thus, suggested that teachers of foreign languages select texts including cultural elements and references that would help students develop their cultural competence and realize that language learning is actually a multidimensional activity involving not only linguistic but also cultural transference from one language to another.

7. Conclusions

The present paper has given rise to criticism and problems that are addressed regarding the role of translation as a learning activity in foreign language learning. In the traditional “grammar-translation” method, translation gained a negative reputation as an unsuccessful tool aiming at stressing to students their errors rather than stressing the importance of what they knew about foreign languages.

To summarise, translation can be used in foreign language learning as a useful tool that can improve students’ language skills and motivate them to the process of learning. More specifically, through a

contrastive approach they can identify similarities and differences between their mother tongue and the foreign language and develop learning strategies in order to handle language problems and facilitate communication. To this context, it actually aims at making students avoid negative interference of their mother tongue that could help students enhance students’ competence in foreign language learning.

It can also draw students’ attention to the cultural elements and concepts of the foreign language and help them handle cultural differences between the two languages, thus, contributing toward cultural competence development. Furthermore, it helps students acquire strategic competence improving all the analytical and problem-solving skills that would enable them to handle language and cultural difficulties.

Finally, this work has showed how translation can be a valid teaching method by helping students develops communicative and social competences by favoring teamwork.

We have also discussed ways in which translation can be used in language teaching classes so as to strengthen its pedagogical role. This work calls for authenticity in the texts to be translated so that translation is viewed as a realistic

activity taking place in the everyday life outside the classroom. The successful implementation of such an approach requires a shift from the traditional teacher-centered model to a more learner-centered approach where students are in the forefront of the learning process and teachers have the role of the facilitator and not the traditional authoritarian role in the classroom. In the framework of this approach, the contribution of translation as a mediating activity between different cultures should be stressed in order to help students acquire competence in handling differences among cultures. Finally, translation should be viewed as a useful pedagogical tool aiming to cultivate students' attitude toward teamwork and group belonging as well as their ability to criticize other peoples' choices in a constructive way.

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