

WHY TRANSLATION MATTERS FOR LANGUAGE LEARNERS: A 21st CENTURY PERSPECTIVE

¿Por qué la traducción es fundamental para los estudiantes de lenguas?: una perspectiva del siglo XXI

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1. INTRODUCTION

Much writing has been done about the value of translation for language teaching; most of that writing has been limited to complaining about the lack of positive effects of translation on the learning process. The whole issue appears to suffer from widespread misunderstanding. Let me suggest that the reason for this misunderstanding is that practising teachers and teaching methodologists are unwilling (or perhaps unable) to understand and accept translation beyond the traditional dichotomy of didactic and professional translation. For most language teachers and students, didactic translation has been equated with the infamous *grammar translation method* (GTM) which is to be avoided due to its artificiality and lack of motivation for students; as for *professional translation*, this is understood as a bread-winning activity beyond the abilities and aspirations of most language learners and therefore to be avoided in language teaching as well. Translation, however, has multiple forms, each of which—when applied in the right teaching context—holds enormous potential for language teachers *and* learners.

Introduced as a massive teaching method in Prussia in 1783 but used as early as medieval times, translation remained one of the most discussed issues in language pedagogy throughout the 20th century, polarizing the academic community. With the direct method and its many subtypes gaining in popularity from the turn of the 20th century, translation was expelled from language teaching altogether in some cultures, whereas other nations, including Central and Eastern Europe, remained, due to the political isolation of the Eastern bloc, immune to the latest trends in the English speaking world and Western Europe, pursuing their own research into teaching methodology in which the mother tongue (MT) and translation had a vital place. After these regions were fully integrated back into the world market with the fall of Communism around 1990, they too began to be dominated by monolingual books and teaching methods. This applies mainly to English, but other languages have seen a similar, albeit less aggressive, trend.

As a result, translation—at least in the Czech Republic—is now, from the methodological point of view, restricted to books for self-learners and, to a limited extent, to primary and secondary school curricula. But translation continues to be used unofficially, even in classes which boast about their affiliation with approaches going under different names but generally known as direct or monolingual methods, where “teachers who have been trained and contracted to teach without translation nevertheless occasionally resort to it when all else fails, which may be quite often” (Cook 2010: 3). While translation is still occasionally—if rather secretly—used by teachers, it is definitely used by learners themselves. As Claypole (2010) points out, no matter what method is used in the classroom, students tend to use bilingual resources outside it, often making use of online dictionaries and parallel texts in several languages. As so many have said, attempts can be made to banish MT from the classroom, but it will never be banished from learners’ heads.

2. BREAKING WITH THE MONOLINGUAL PARADIGM

Recently, several scholars have been brave enough to point out the need for an overall change of thinking about the role and use of translation in language teaching. In fact, isolated calls have been heard from academia since at least the 1960s. However, it was not until several years ago that a *bilingual reform* was announced by a tandem of British and German authors, Wolfgang

Butzkamm and John Caldwell. Indeed, the title of their seminal work, *The Bilingual Reform: A Paradigm Shift in Foreign Language Teaching* (2009), is itself telling. A shift of paradigm is understood as a complete break with methods and principles of the past. The Bilingual Reform is therefore about moving the role of the MT from a marginal position to a central one. The time has come to review the dominant position of monolingual teaching methodologies and, wherever possible, to reintroduce bilingual activities—including translation—alongside the monolingual ones. Guy Cook reveals one of the major absurdities of language teaching history: “When initiating a shift from form and artificial exercises towards meaning, successful communication and real language, the teaching methodologists of the 1970s working on various subtypes of the direct method claimed that their goal was to help the student and her needs; ironically, in doing so, they chose to ignore one of the main constituents of student identity—the mother tongue” (cf. Cook 2009). What must be appreciated, however, is that the proponents of the bilingual reform want bilingual activities to be generally accepted as a complement to the monolingual method rather than an exclusive alternative to it, proving they have adopted a wiser approach than the methodologists of the past.

Simplistically, translation has two basic roles and areas of benefit for language learners: a means to an end and an end in itself. Both are internally multifaceted, and it is the objective of the rest of the present paper to explain their potential for language learners of the early twenty-first century.

At lower levels, from Beginners to Intermediate (say, from Levels A1 to B1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages), translation has the obvious and long-known potential as an instrument for presenting, practising and testing grammar and vocabulary (a means to an end). That potential has, unfortunately, been largely underexploited by generations of teachers. The above mentioned work by Butzkamm and Caldwell is an invaluable source of inspiration and detailed teaching methodology for grassroots teachers willing to take the bilingual path. At more advanced levels, translation finds multiple roles either as an efficient testing method capable of revealing strengths and weaknesses in the students’ performance which may not be revealed by purely monolingual exercises; moreover, translation—written or spoken—can also be practised as an end in itself, enabling learners to develop a skill that is becoming more and more important as we move into the 21st century.

3. LITERAL OR FREE?

The negative legacy of the GTM seems so deep-rooted that if authors who are clearly in favour of monolingual teaching allow the possibility of the occasional use of translation, they are quick to point out that literal translation should be avoided. For instance, Háňková warns against the use of literal translation; instead, emphasis should be placed on natural expression of meaning in both languages (2011: 54). This is an oversimplified view as translation in all its diverse forms holds enormous potential for the various stages of the learning process.

Translation Studies has known several typologies of translation methods. Christiane Nord's typology revolves around the "function of the translation process and the function of the target text as the result of this process" (Nord 1997: 47). The two key terms—*documentary* and *instrumental* translations—are two basic types at the most general level; both contain a spectrum of subtypes, and it is all parts of this spectrum that can be exploited by language teachers. Those translation types subsumed under the heading *documentary* (especially *interlinear*, *literal* and *philological* translations whose function is predominantly *metatextual*, i.e. to reproduce the source-language system, documenting the way the FL works—hence called *documentary*) have the greatest potential in the first stages of learning as a means of explaining and testing new grammar and vocabulary. On the other hand, *instrumental* translations are intended to achieve in the target language and culture the same function that the source text had in the source language and culture and can be therefore integrated into the advanced stages of the learning process as an exercise in intercultural communication, even though assessment standards will naturally be less strict than for students in translation degree programmes.¹

Some of the variants of *documentary* translation are not dissimilar to the GTM—and some even surpass it in artificiality; yet, they have a legitimate place in language teaching and are worth revisiting and developing to exploit their full potential. One of the areas where *literal* and *overliteral* translation can be employed is *explicit contrasting* of MT and FL systems, making students aware of differences and—less often—similarities between the two systems. Hendrich

¹ The possible settings (institutions of secondary, further and higher education) and ways in which translation and/or interpreting can be applied as an integral part of foreign-language education are explained by Mraček (cf. 2012).

(1988)² suggests confrontation should only be used where pedagogically effective, especially in those features with a higher tendency towards interference.³

Butzkamm and Caldwell introduce the term *mirroring* for literal translations and adaptations intended to highlight the form of the new grammar or vocabulary. Students will no doubt find the word-for-word translation strange; and it is exactly why they will remember the structure better than through a purely monolingual explanation. In the process, students not only decode meaning, they also “break the code”. Code-breaking means understanding the form, which, for Butzkamm and Caldwell, is equally important as understanding the meaning. In total, understanding meaning *and* form constitutes what the authors term “dual comprehension” (Doppelverstehen) (Butzkamm and Caldwell 2009: 51), the *sine qua non* for successful learning. It has sometimes been wrongly assumed that in order to learn a foreign language one only has to receive enough comprehensible input (i.e. to expose oneself to a constant flow of authentic language). But unlike adult native speakers, who rarely pause to think about the form, learners need to understand both the meaning and the form if they want to really learn a language. This is because understanding meaning does not automatically lead to active processing and acquisition. “Only to the extent that we understand both meaning and form can we turn input into intake which can be processed syntactically. Only then can we make utterances of our own which we have never heard before” (ibid: 53). This is, in fact, not dissimilar to the way children crack the code of their mother tongue.

What can be even more effective is to place these literal translations alongside more natural versions. Seeing the unnatural and ungrammatical version right next to its more idiomatic version, students will more easily under-

² *Didaktika cizích jazyků* (Pedagogy of Foreign Languages) is a collective monograph targeted at future teachers authored by a team led by Josef Hendrich, a Czech authority on language teaching, contains valuable details on the development of diverse teaching methods in different parts of the world and has a special chapter on the use of translation and interpreting, proving that authors from behind the Iron Curtain (i.e. the Eastern bloc) never lost sight of the important place bilingual activities have in language teaching.

³ Interference is only one aspect of a more general concept known as *language transfer*, which can be negative as well as positive. One possibility is that the student’s practical as well as theoretical knowledge of MT has a positive influence on the acquisition of any other language. Negative transfer, on the other hand, is known as interference. Both may concern grammar, phonetics as well as vocabulary (Hendrich 1988: 43ff.). Leaving a more visible mark on the student’s performance, negative transfer is a topic which receives attention from among teachers and authors, whereas the effects of positive transfer, being less palpable, suffer from undervaluation.

stand and remember the structural difference between features of MT and FL. Moreover, awareness of differences makes interference less likely. The tandem of overliteral and idiomatic translations can be used to highlight structural differences concerning any aspect of language, from morphology, word formation,⁴ lexical items such as false friends or idioms,⁵ through grammar areas such as word order⁶ or tense systems, to more complex fields such as contrastive rhetoric. All of this means that the MT can become a reliable source of metalinguistic knowledge that the student has already had to master. And it is not an unwelcome surprise that in the process students will become aware of a thing or two about their MT that they had not noticed before.

However, the role of translation as a practising and testing device is not restricted to lower levels of language skills. On the contrary, it can be employed to great effect even at advanced and very advanced levels. Being a complex process composed of many different linguistic operations, translation has huge potential as a holistic linguistic exercise. It can be used to test and practise disciplines such as reading comprehension, writing skills, vocabulary and grammar, all at the same time, in MT as well as FL (in the same way, interpreting can test listening and speaking skills plus vocabulary and grammar all at the same time). In other words, the traditional portfolio of classroom exercises, including multiple choice, open cloze, syntax transformations, can be complemented with translation as a multi-level exercise, in which students need a much broader focus and have an opportunity to exploit a much wider area of language knowledge. A holistic exercise, however, requires less literal forms of translation, such as those in the “instrumental” half of Nord’s typology. Cook summarizes the many practical advantages of and tips for using translation at advanced levels:

Activities may involve oral as well as written practice, and focus on connected text rather than isolated sentences. Successful translation, moreover, may be judged by criteria other than formal lexical and grammatical equivalence. Students may be assessed for speed as well

⁴ Example for word formation: German: *Tierarzt*; English word-for-word: *animal doctor; English idiomatic: *veterinarian/vet* (Butzkamm and Caldwell 2009:110).

⁵ Example for idiomatic phrases: Spanish: *agarrarse a un clavo ardiendo*; English word-for-word: *hold on to a burning nail*; English idiomatic: *a drowning man will clutch a straw* (Butzkamm and Caldwell 2009: 111).

⁶ Example for word order: German: *Wir müssen Deutsch lernen*; English word-for-word: **We must German learn*; English idiomatic: *We must learn German* (Butzkamm and Caldwell 2009: 108).

as accuracy. They may be encouraged to translate for gist, to seek pragmatic or stylistic equivalence (1998: 119).

Obviously, the concept of *translation* covers a number of different types of text production activities, and virtually all of them can be employed in language teaching, depending on factors such as proficiency level, amount of time available as well as the teacher's own abilities and motivation.

4. ADVANTAGES FOR THE LEARNING PROCESS

Apart from the above role as a supportive mechanism on which teacher and student alike can rely when explaining and *actively* absorbing new grammar and vocabulary, translation has further advantages for the efficiency of the learning process and—no less importantly—the overall classroom atmosphere.

One of the positive roles of translation is that of a preventative tool. Cook (2010: 136f.) points out that while the ability to express meaning flexibly and innovatively, e.g. the paraphrasing skill, is important for language learners, there are times when students need to confront grammar or lexical difficulties, not to avoid them. Some activities, which are primarily intended to practise and test the flexible expression of meaning, such as role-play dialogue, free conversation or essay writing, allow students to resort to avoidance strategies. Having no restriction as to the form of expression, the student will often opt for grammar and vocabulary that they are familiar with; if such activities dominate the class curriculum, the student's range of active grammar and vocabulary may remain restricted even after prolonged study. In contrast, translation provides students with limited manoeuvring room, making them actively seek and attempt to use words or grammar in their passive knowledge that they would not feel confident enough to use in monolingual meaning-based activities.

A further point is that comparisons between the “multiple choice” type of exercise and translation have found that students may score much better results with the multiple choice, the reason being very simple: students either may guess the correct answer from the four options or, by seeing the right answer alongside the three wrong ones, they are visually reminded of the correct one. Either way, the correct answer is more likely to be obtained in this type of exercise whereas translation fully depends on the actual active knowl-

edge and is, therefore, more efficient in revealing the true picture of the student's current level of proficiency (cf. Žlábková 2007).

Last but not least, translation—or the ability to switch to a native language even for a short time—has a psychological advantage. The regular and controlled use of the MT helps ease tension and brings a humane touch to the classroom, especially where all students and the teacher share the same MT and may find it somewhat strange to be forced to communicate exclusively in a foreign language.

5. TRANSLATION AS A FIFTH SKILL

Apart from the above ways in which translation can positively influence the learning process itself, there is a different type of advantage that translation may have for students in the long run. It has to do with the humanistic concept of education. Indeed, authors writing about the supportive role of translation and MT have, with increasing frequency and emphasis, been suggesting that translation competence as an independent skill (the 'end-in-itself' part of our dichotomy; known as the Fifth Skill next to reading, writing, listening, speaking) should be integrated in language teaching curricula. Among practising educationists, this phenomenon has until now received little attention, probably reflecting the popular belief that knowledge of a foreign language automatically guarantees translation competence. Language training institutions across the world have been boasting a newly expanded portfolio of skills that they now offer to their student-clients in response to new market demands requiring more flexible language speakers. The newly taught skills include intercultural communication, project management, time, stress and conflict management, creativity, critical thinking, video conference skills, negotiation and presentation skills or academ-

⁷ The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, a document initiated by the Council of Europe outlining the basic guidelines for language teaching curricula and language skills that should be taught to enable students to act efficiently through communication, contains the concept of *mediation*, where the learner is supposed to act as an intermediary between interlocutors rather than expressing her own ideas. Examples of mediating activities include spoken interpretation and written translation as well as summarising and paraphrasing texts in the same language (Council of Europe 2001: 87). At a theoretical level, then, translation seems to be an integral part of what language learners should learn. At a practical level, although the six degrees of competence (A1-C2) that CEFR introduced have become a popular topic among teachers and methodologists, hardly any attention has until now been paid to the mediating competence contained in the same document.

ic writing. All are very useful skills, no doubt. But what is surprising is that very few authors and institutions mention translation.⁷

The marginal attention that translation enjoys in some of the writing about intercultural communication is less surprising in authors who belong to dominant, English-speaking cultures. Members of these cultures do need to interact with representatives of distant or less dominant cultures but they have somehow become accustomed to the fact that those cultures will more willingly and easily learn English than members of English-speaking cultures would learn their language. Therefore, translation is less relevant for English-speaking authors. On the other hand, for less dominant cultures—including Czech culture—translation is an unavoidable part of intercultural communication.

It is even more surprising when you consider how close some of the above mentioned skills are to translation and/or interpreting. A brief look at the process of translation and the social and cognitive aspects of the translating profession suggests that skills like academic writing, project management, creativity and critical thinking can all be subsumed under translating and are vital to its successful practice. Similarly, time, stress and conflict management, video conference and presentation skills as well as creativity and critical thinking are highly relevant to interpreting which, too, can be a fifth subskill to be developed in more advanced stages of language learning.

Cook (2010: 109) argues that “in multilingual, multicultural societies (which nowadays means just about everywhere), and in a world of constant cross-linguistic and cross-cultural global communication, there are reasons to see translation as being widely needed in everyday situations, and not as a specialized activity at all.” Maurice Claypole (2010) points out that a great number of people in today’s Germany are expected to translate in their work settings although they have never received any training in the translating skill. Similarly, Wrede (2005) reports on changing trends in Slovakia, arguing that considering the current and future requirements of the market, local as well as international, translation as a fifth skill is becoming a vital additional competence of tomorrow’s managers, economists, lawyers or engineers. These professionals may be required to transform their expert knowledge adequately between MT and FL. Expanding their intercultural communication skills with translation enhances the capital that they bring to the market and may result in enhanced prestige, recognition and authority.

The points made above about Germany and Slovakia can be generalized to cover the whole non-English world, given the ever increasing status of English as a *lingua franca*. However, it is obvious that—in addition to English—each culture will have further needs concerning other languages, depending on the respective market and social needs (e.g. increasing interlingual and intercultural contact between the Czech Republic and Russia or Poland necessitated by intensive economic industrial cooperation, although here, too, English may, and often does, assume the role of *lingua franca*).

6. CONCLUSION

In recent years, translation has been regaining its position among language teaching methods. It is modern in all its roles and areas of use. It is modern as a teaching device for lower levels of proficiency because it takes into consideration the students' greatest asset, their mother tongue. It is equally modern for advanced levels in that students expand their portfolio of language skills with one that is useful in many ways, making life easier in private as well as professional settings.

The theoretical resources are abundant, and the battle in favour of translation in language teaching seems to have been won, at least at theoretical level. Numerous articles and monographs have been published by leading scholars with solid argumentation and very detailed methodology; they are just waiting to be picked up by practising teachers and school managers of the twenty-first century.

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