

Translation in Foreign Language Teaching

The fifth skill

Translation and interpreting are essential social skills and a useful language learning tool preparing learners for real-life situations in their jobs and studies. Here, Dr Boris Naimushin discusses the need to recognize translation and interpreting skills as an important element of communicative and linguistic competence alongside the other four skills.

'Many fluent speakers of a foreign language fail miserably when they attempt translation.' *Charles Fries*

It is most important for a science to generate new ideas, approaches, and methods and to respond to changes in society, culture, and people. This is especially true with linguistics – the science of language – because language is not only used to measure and understand the world; it is, itself, the bearer of culture.

Of course, absolutely new theoretical constructs and approaches are hardly an everyday occurrence in any field of study. What is usually witnessed, in most cases, are more or less radical shifts in angles of approach, priorities, and points of view. In linguistics, the new paradigm focuses on the communicative aspects of the language. As *Wolfram Wilts* points out in his book *The Science of Translation*, 'Modern linguistics is regarded as a primarily communicative discipline...' (*Wilts* 1982:11).

The current situation

At present FLT methodology as a whole is dominated by the communicative approach that has come to be known as communicative language teaching (CLT). CLT regards language as social behavior, purposeful, and always in context, and offers a view of the language learner as a partner in learning

(*Savignon* 1993). From this point of view, CLT emphasizes the shortcomings of both grammatical and skills-based syllabuses. However, the skills-based model has been around for decades now and is likely to remain influential in the future because there are indeed differences between the four modes of performance usually identified in FLT methodology, i.e. speaking, writing, listening, and reading. For me, the problem is not in the skills-based model itself, but rather in the scope of skills included in the model. Traditionally, this model neglects translation and interpretation skills and undermines the importance of the use of L1 in the L2 classroom.

Modern FLT coursebooks are firmly based on the foreign-language-only principle. They are created by native speakers of the respective language and are meant to be taught in this language only. The underlying assumption is that it is absolutely possible for an adult learner of a foreign language to achieve high levels of communicative and linguistic competence in this language studying it from an elementary level (without any prior knowledge of the language) in the hands of a qualified native speaker who cannot utter a word in the mother tongue of the student and therefore cannot make sure that his explanations are thoroughly understood by the student.

It is hardly surprising that many important grammatical and other issues remain half-understood or completely distorted in the mind of the student¹. This encourages negative interference from the first language into the foreign language and vice versa.

The problem

Ironically, when even the most ardent adherents of communicative methods find themselves on the receiving end of "communicative teaching", they do not seem to feel extremely comfortable about the experience. Every now and then, they switch into their mother tongue for explanation and clarification. For me, it is a rather dramatic demonstration of the limitations of the foreign-language-only approach.

Another relevant issue is that we rarely learn a foreign language for the sole purpose of foreign-language-only communication. A personal assistant in a local or international company in Sofia, Moscow, or Prague is expected not only to possess a high level of proficiency in at least one foreign language but also to be able to perform quality translations of various types of documentation and interpret at meetings. In all spheres of activity we are confronted with the daily necessity of indulging in some forms of translation and interpreting.

Sadly, the need for formal training in translation and interpreting in the FLT classroom has been greatly underplayed. Translation and interpreting skills are not regarded as an essential element of overall communicative and linguistic competence. The widespread assumption is that the achievement of a certain level of proficiency in a given foreign language will by itself enable you to translate and interpret successfully. Nothing is further from the truth. Translation and interpreting techniques, even on a non-professional level, are specific skills requiring formal training. As Charles Fries, the father of TEFL in the USA, put it, 'Many fluent speakers of a foreign language fail miserably when they attempt translation.' (Fries 1945:9). For this reason, the basics of translation and interpreting techniques should be included in FLT methodology as the fifth skill and applied to the level and specific needs of the students.

¹ In theory, most FLT specialists recognize the necessity for a systematic comparison between native and foreign language. However, in practice they usually do not go beyond 'the use of full sentences in the first language to give the meaning of the dialogues for memorization' (Lado 1964).

This idea is not a new one. Elements of translation and interpreting have always been part of the language learning process in classes where the teacher can communicate with the students in their mother tongue. It is no surprise that 'the need for some form of translation work in language learning is usually advocated more frequently by non-native teachers of English, or English mother-tongue teachers who have a reasonably good command of the students' own language' (Ross 2000:61). The problem is that training in this fifth skill is not at all popular in most modern FLT classrooms and its importance is more often than not underestimated. To some extent, this is a leftover reaction to the old grammar-translation method. Modern language teachers have been trained in an atmosphere of total denunciation of this method, and any form of translation work in the FLT classroom is regarded almost as a heresy. A teacher defending the necessary and facilitating role of L1 in the L2 classroom, is fully aware that such a position 'may seem heretical in light of what most of us were taught when trained as ESL/EFL professionals...' (Schweers 1999:6).

Positive recent developments

On the positive side, more and more teachers and theorists are expressing their worries about this 'absurd state of affairs' (Hardin, Picot 1990) and are striving to change it (Titford, Hieke 1985; Snell-Hornby 1985; Brownlee, Denton 1987; Newmark 1991; Ross 2000, etc.). The teaching of translation and interpreting in an FLT classroom must be clearly distinguished from training professional translators and interpreters; the objectives and methods of these two types of training are very different, although comparable. Similarly, when we teach grammar in our FLT classes and introduce elements of contrastive analysis between two languages, our aim is not to train professional grammarians but to provide our students with yet another aid to language learning.

Nigel Ross, of the City of Milan School for Translators and Interpreters, rightly suggests that FLT teachers are not in the job of training students to become professional translators or interpreters and that the teaching of translation in the FLT environment should clearly remain very distant from the teaching of translation as a vocational skill (Ross 2000:62). However, the reasonable and well-prepared use of translation and interpreting work in a FLT classroom can be an efficient tool alongside

the other four basic skills. Thus, P. Newmark, a distinguished researcher in the field of translation studies, notes that 'translation from L1 to L2 and L2 to L1 is recognized as the fifth skill and the most important social skill since it promotes communication and understanding between strangers.' (Newmark 1991).

Translation and interpreting as an efficient language-learning tool

Translation and interpreting is an efficient tool with respect to various aspects of FLT methodology. It creates opportunities for contrastive analysis between the mother tongue and the foreign language on different levels including phonology,

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morphology, syntax, and lexis. Contrastive analysis of two or more languages deals with both systemic and functional equivalence between linguistic units of these languages. It is necessary to discriminate between these two types of equivalence since similarities on the systemic level do not necessarily presuppose the existence of such similarities on the functional level. Thus, for instance, the aspect and tense systems of the verb in Russian and Western Slavonic languages are comparable on the level of system but show significant differences in the functioning of verbal forms in the Present and Past Tenses.

It is in this aspect that the interaction between translation studies, contrastive linguistics and FLT methodology becomes most obvious. On the one hand, the use of translation in the FLT classroom will encourage students to compare linguistic units of the two languages on the basis of their meaning irrespective of the level of the linguistic hierarchy they belong to. On the other hand, the newly gained

awareness of the structural differences between the two languages as well as of the different functions of similar structures in them will surely reduce the level of the negative interference between L1 and L2 (Bley-Vroman 1989:51-53).

A practical example

There is a variety of specific methods and approaches related to the use of translation in the FLT classroom depending on the needs and level of proficiency of the students. Here I would like to suggest an exercise aimed at developing skills in the so-called adaptive transcoding (Kade 1980) which I have found extremely useful and rewarding at different levels of instruction. In contrast to translation, adaptive transcoding is a type of language interaction in which the original information is not only transferred (or transcoded) into the target language but also transformed (or adapted) according to the specific objectives of the communicative act. Before the actual exercise, I usually take time to talk with the students about the different types of translation and to make sure they fully understand the purpose of the exercise and gain some insight into the basic assumptions of the theory of translation.

After that, I give out recent copies of magazines and newspapers in L1 or L2 (in my case L1 is Bulgarian and L2 is either English or Russian) and ask each one of them to pick out and read an article. Then the students are asked to take turns in rendering the essentials of the meaning of the article into the target language. In assessing the translation into their mother tongue, special attention is paid to the natural and grammatically correct flow of speech without interference from grammatical structures of the source language.

Contrary to the wide-spread belief that the major obstacle to adult foreign language learning is interference from the students' first language, my observations show that negative interference from the foreign language quite often has more dramatic proportions, even in cases of professional translators². At the initial stages of instruction, students really have no idea of what they are producing and it is only their classmates' reaction ranging from

² On the basis of studies conducted in the 1970s many researchers have argued, for instance, that interference from the student's first language accounts for perhaps 5-25% of grammatical errors (see Dulay, Burt, and Krashen 1982:102-8 for a summary of the research of the 1970s)

genuine surprise to uncontrollable laughter that tells them that something is wrong. It is also worthwhile recording the translations of the students so that they could see for themselves the result of their efforts.

In assessing translation into a foreign language, special attention is paid to the development of the skills of rendering the essential meaning of the paragraph, article etc, using the resources that are available to the student. This ultimately helps the student to grasp the basic principle of this type of translation, to see that there is always a way of finding a synonym, trying a paraphrase or even a longer explanation to fulfill the communicative objective. This gradually takes a lot of stress out of their lives because they come to understand that there will always be words and expressions they do not know but this cannot be an obstacle to a successful communication. The students will also realize that translation as a whole and adaptive transcoding in particular is not about word-by-word rendering of the structure of the original message in the target language but is communication-oriented, and that the equivalence of the entire message is supreme to the equivalence of its segments.

Conclusion

There are many ways of using translation and interpretation in the FLT classroom as the fifth skill alongside the other four basic skills. Translation and interpretation are essential social skills and require formal training, even on a non-professional level. These skills represent a very important element of the students' linguistic and communicative competence preparing them for real-life situations in their jobs and studies. We should try to avoid the extremes both of the old grammar-translation method and of the modern communicative methods.

Back in the 1970s some linguists voiced a cautious opinion that probably in the future language teachers would once again examine the effectiveness of translation (Falk 1973:377). This future has come and the need to include translation and interpreting as the fifth skill in the FLT classroom is more urgent than ever.

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