

Translation in Language Teaching and Learning

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ABSTRACT

The article reveals the essence of relationship between translation and language learning in foreign language classes.

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As its title indicates this article sets out to consider the relationship between three activities: translation, language learning and language teaching. Nobody doubts that there is a relationship between the second and third of these, although as the history of language pedagogy makes clear, nobody seems to know just what this relationship should be. In the case of translation, the question is whether there is any relationship at all. In one entrenched tradition of pedagogic thinking, as Cook has pointed out, translation has been outlawed not only as an irrelevance but an impediment to language teaching and his book presents a convincing argument for its methodological reinstatement as a classroom activity. Cook's focus of attention is translation in language teaching and this of course involves a consideration of language learning. As will become apparent, is that it is precisely the assumption of reciprocity—that the two “generally go together”—that needs to be questioned. For it generally also implies the presupposition that there is a dependent unilateral relationship between them: teaching is the cause and learning the effect, that in talking about Translation in language learning one is talking implicitly or explicitly about TILL at the same time. A similar cause-effect relationship is assumed in the extensive literature on task-based activities which are sometimes said to constitute task based language teaching (TBLT) and sometimes task-based language learning (TBLL): the second is taken to be the necessary consequence of the first.

But this relationship is not a necessary or natural one. One might argue, indeed, that it is teaching which depends on learning rather than the other way round. We cannot be said to teach anything unless it is learned, but of course we learn all kinds of things without being taught, including language. This is readily accepted in the case of our L1. There seems no reason to suppose that the same does not apply to the L2. To be sure the data we draw on to learn our L1 is in some degree selected and organized by our social environment and the conventions of upbringing. These provide conditions for learning, but they do not determine what we learn. In the case of L2 pedagogy, on the other hand, what is taken to be learnt is so determined in that it is required to conform to what is taught. It is recognized that the process of independent learning takes place, as is clear from the “errors” that learners “commit” but even when these are seen positively as evidence of learning, the assumption remains that the learning has eventually to be directed towards conformity to teaching input. The learning process is seen only as a means to that end. But what if we focus attention on this process as an end in itself? What if we think of tasks or translation activities not as teaching devices to get learners to toe the line and conform but as providing conditions to activate the learning process, no matter how non-conformist the outcomes might be? What if we think first of the relationship between translation and language learning and only then consider the

relationship between translation and language teaching –make TILT dependent on TILL and not the

other way round? To do so we need first to consider the nature of translation itself. As has often been pointed out, one difficulty about getting a conceptual grasp of the essential nature of translation is that the term itself is ambiguous. As a mass noun it denotes the process of translating, and as a count noun it denotes the resulting product. In the conventional use of the term, and especially as applied to the occupational activity of translators and interpreters, the two are assumed to be inseparably implicated, the process only engaged in as a means to an end product. But this can be misleading, for we need to note that it is perfectly possible to engage in the covert psycholinguistic process of translation without producing a translation as an overt result. One can be a translator, so to speak without being a translator—and indeed, as I shall argue later, one has to be a translator if one is to make any sense of language at all. Most definitions of translation, however, are concerned with what translators do. Here, for example, are two definitions almost 50 years apart. Translation is an operation performed on languages: a process of substituting a text in one language for a text in another. This raises a number of critical issues about the nature of translation which bear directly on the question of its pedagogic relevance that this chapter is concerned with. To begin with, the replacement of one text by another involves the rendering of an interpretation and so the translated text can never be a reproduction of the original as a whole but only a derived and partial version of it.

Partiality is intrinsic to translation in two respects. Firstly, interpretation of the original, as of any text, involves a differential focussing whereby the main significance of the message is identified and in this sense the activity will always in some degree reduce the original to what are taken to be its “essential parts”.

Secondly, at the rendering stage, the second text will have to be recipient designed and this will necessarily involve some adaptation. In the case of conference interpreting, where the original is designed for known recipients, there is a requirement to reproduce it as closely as possible with minimal adaptation. But in other cases, recipients of a translated text may well be groups of people who are different from those for whom the original was designed, and who are very likely to have “different needs and expectations”. Both of these definitions of translation talk about the replacement of one text by another. Each of these texts is a determinate linguistic object which is the product of an indeterminate discourse process. The translator’s task is to interpret the data of the original text as evidence of what its producer might have meant by it and then produce another text. This then provides data from which, in turn, its recipient has then to derive evidence for interpretation of what this producer might have meant by it. And, to complicate matters further, what meaning is intended is itself compounded of three elements: propositional, illocutionary and perlocutionary, to use the terms of speech act theory. That is to say, the text producer intends the text to make reference to something and in so doing to express some kind of illocutionary force to achieve some kind of perlocutionary effect. So what reference, force and effect a text producer might have meant to convey, the discourse that is intended to be textualized, can only be indirectly inferred from the textual data: it is necessarily a function of partial interpretation—hence the indeterminacy. In the case of translation, the indeterminacy is twofold since it involves the interpretation of the reference, force and effect of two different texts—the original as interpreted by the translator, and the translated text as interpreted by its recipient. To spell out the process in more detail:

a first person (P1) has meaning to express, an intended discourse (Discourse A), and designs a text accordingly (Text 1) which the recipient (P2) then interprets, thereby deriving a discourse from it (Discourse B), which may or may not correspond closely with Discourse A. So far, this is a normal, necessarily indeterminate, pragmatic process that everybody engages in to make sense of language use. But translators then have further work to do. They have in turn to assume a P1 role and produce a second text (Text 2) which will not only incorporate their interpretation with reference to the first text but also be designed for a different P2 recipient—so the discourse (Discourse C) which is

rendered as the translated text may vary in its degree of correspondence to the discourse (Discourse B) that the translator derived from the original text. And this rendered text, of course, is then interpreted by the recipient P2 to derive a further discourse (Discourse D). The whole complex process might be represented as follows:

P1 Discourse A → Text 1 → P2 Interpretation 1 → Discourse B

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P1 Discourse C → Text 2 → P2 Interpretation → Discourse D

It is often said, something always gets lost in translation. This suggests that there is some complete meaning inscribed in text which in principle can be fully recovered and conveyed. But there is no such inscribed meaning and no possibility of such recovery. It is not that something gets lost in translation, it is rather that different interpreters find different things, focus on different aspects of meaning, derive different discourses from a text. With regard to classroom activities, these too would obviously need to be bilingually designed. Consider, for example, TBLT, which was referred to earlier and which is so widely advocated these days. The basic principle of this approach would be retained—namely that tasks would be designed to get learners to achieve a communicative outcome by the use of their own linguistic resources. But obviously the inhibiting condition that these resources have to be drawn only from the L2 would be abandoned and with it the assumption that the purpose of tasks is to develop L2 competence along the dimensions of complexity, accuracy and fluency. Instead, tasks would get learners to make use of all their linguistic resources, but would be designed so as to constrain the use of the L2 where this is required to achieve a communicative outcome. The communicative outcome then becomes primary and the essential question for research in task design is to find out how different kinds of outcome call for a differential deployment of linguistic resources.

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