The Role of Translation in Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract:
In the past decades, language teaching methodology has shifted its focus from a linguistic to a communicative approach, thus placing great emphasis on learners' proficiency, that is, their ability to communicate in the target language. As a result, classroom activities involving students' own languages have been discouraged, and translation, as a bilingual activity, has been dismissed on account of its being old-fashioned, academic, artificial, difficult, and largely impractical. However, the role of translation in foreign language acquisition has recently been revised, and a new concept of "communicative" translation has been introduced. Referring to the particular case of Romanian as the mother tongue/L1 and English as the target language/L2, the aim of this paper is to take a diachronic look at the theoretical and political arguments against pedagogical translation, and bring arguments in favour of introducing translation activities in foreign language education. Drawing on the theoretical considerations presented and the author's teaching experience, the main conclusion is that acts of translating can contribute to the development of learners' communicative skills, and the promotion of their linguistic and cultural identities.

Keywords: *accuracy, communicative translation, fluency, language learning, language teaching, pedagogical translation.*

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Introduction

The end of the communist era in Romania brought forth numerous changes in virtually all sectors of activity and fields of study. People's need to learn foreign languages, especially English, greatly increased after 1989, the process being closely related to the physical and metaphorical opening of borders. Second language methodology was adapted to the more modern theories and politics of teaching practised in the West, leading to a rapid shift of focus from the Grammar-Translation Method, extensively used before 1989, to a communicative approach in language teaching. Thinking that this approach had become popular around the world in the 1970s, we can infer that Romania was late in adopting this paradigm of developing communicative competence, which encourages the use of L2 in the classroom, and dismisses any attempt to use L1 in the process of teaching and learning. As a result, translation is no longer used as part of classroom activities in Romania, because here, like elsewhere in the world, it is "considered taboo in modern-day language teaching" (Banitz, 2022: 1), "glibly dismissed in the inner-circle academic literature" (Cook, 2007: 397), and even largely forgotten (Weller, 1989: 39).

The Grammar-Translation Method is nevertheless very familiar to many of us; I myself studied English by this paradigm. Apart from it not being "fashionable" anymore, one reason for which the method is fiercely rejected in Romania is its connection with the communist regime and its rigid teaching system. Consequently, the teachers, who once learned the language that they are now teaching by this method, are not supposed to use it in their lessons. The ones who occasionally resort to translation in the classroom, myself included, do it with caution and hesitation out of a feeling of being out of trend.

The aim of this paper is to provide reasons against the largely spread conviction that translation is wrong, that it is an artificial exercise with no connection to real communication. Furthermore, it will bring arguments in favour of using pedagogic translation in the classroom, emphasising the efficiency of translation as a method, as a means of language learning, rather than as a goal in itself, or "the end product" of the teaching/learning process (Machida, 2011: 740). Used judiciously, translations between Romanian and English will contribute to the development of learners' communicative skills.

Translation is wrong: theoretical and political arguments against pedagogical translation

The hostility towards the use of translation in foreign language teaching is explained by Guy Cook in terms of its inevitable connection to "authoritarian teaching, dull lessons, form rather than function, writing rather than speech, accuracy rather than fluency, and laboured rather than automated production" (Cook, 2007: 396-397). In other words, the criticisms arouse as a consequence of a growing dissatisfaction not with translation itself, but with its association with the Grammar-Translation Method, also called the "Classical Method". Discussing this approach, Diane Larsen-Freeman points out that translation was initially used in the teaching of Latin and Greek (the 16th century), and the main goals were to enable students to translate one language into another language (Larsen-Freeman, 2008: 15). The method placed emphasis on memorising vocabulary and grammar rules, on developing reading and writing skills, while little attention was paid to speaking, listening, or pronunciation (Brown, 2001: 18-19). Classes were taught in the native language, and students' proficiency was measured

according to their ability to translate texts, especially literary ones, from the target language into their mother tongue. As a result, the courses were much disliked by "thousands of school learners, for whom foreign language learning meant a tedious experience of memorizing endless lists of unusable grammar rules and vocabulary and attempting to produce perfect translations of stilted or literary prose" (Richards & Rodgers, 2001: 6).

The end of the 19th century witnessed a growing opposition to the Grammar-Translation Method, which resulted in a "reform movement" that "challenged the value of translation and the efficiency of formal grammar study" (Bowen, Madsen & Hilferty, 1985: 20), and emphasised instead the importance of developing learners' speaking abilities (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Howatt & Widdowson, 2004; Cook, 2007). The Direct Method became popular soon, its main goal being to ban translation in the classroom (Larsen-Freeman, 2008: 23). According to this approach, language means primarily speech and lessons should provide learners with the opportunity to use the language in various situations; new items are introduced via demonstrations, rather than translation or explanation; vocabulary is practised by making full sentences with the new words; students are encouraged to think in the target language; the syllabus is designed on topics or situations, not on grammatical structures (Larsen-Freeman, 2008: 26-28).

` The Direct Method represented a first step of the move away from the "form" of language and towards the ability to use that form in the real world outside the classroom. In the 1970s, it became clear that, in order to communicate, students needed more than linguistic competence; they needed communicative competence (see Hymes, 1971; Halliday, 1978). Communicative Language Teaching thus emerged and became a very popular approach to language teaching. It mainly stated that leaners need to acquire not only grammar knowledge of the target language, but also an understanding of social contexts and norms (see Farell & Jacobs, 2010; Harmer, 2001), so that communication could be efficient.

The target language is both the object of study and "a vehicle for classroom communication" (Larsen-Freeman, 2008: 125), the use of the mother tongue being discouraged. All the games, role-plays, and other pair or group activities, which are included in language teaching programmes, are designed to involve and motivate students to speak in the second language (Savignon, 1991: 265). The "English-only classroom" has become a target, and the communicative methodology comes with sets of practical advice for teachers, meant to help them prevent and restrict the use of the first language (see Scrivener, 2005: 101-102). Although translation is theoretically considered acceptable if used judiciously "when students need or benefit from it" (Richards & Rodgers, 2001: 156), in practice, it is largely considered unrealistic as a means of instruction, even blamed for "doing more damage than good", for "holding back learners from taking the leap into expressing themselves freely in the second language" (Carreres, 2006: 1-2).

To sum up the arguments presented above, the Communicative Approach has put forth a series of pedagogical reasons to account for the peripheral role of translation in language learning, mainly stating that the use of the mother tongue is counter-productive. However, there are also political reasons for the scepticism that surrounds the use of translation in the process of language acquisition. Discussing the case of English and the chauvinistic edge of a desired monolingualism, Guy Cook argues that this practice dates back to the 18th century when the British tried to impose their language over the Scots Gaelic, believing that "national unity is attained through

linguistic […] unity, and that the solution to communication problems between two languages was for one of them simply to be abandoned in favour of the other – making translation superfluous" (Cook, 2007: 398). From this perspective, translation was banned in language teaching by "scholars from two of Europe's most belligerently nationalist states – England and Germany" (Cook, 2007: 399), and further supported and promoted by young teachers from English-speaking countries who have flooded the world since the 1960s.

After 1990, native-speaker teachers came to Romanian schools and universities and set a standard of monolingual teaching which non-native teachers were supposed to strive to achieve. In this paradigm, only a "weak" teacher would use translation to help his/her students, and hence the pressure on teachers to avoid any resort to Romanian language. More often than not, in Romania teachers speak in English to their students even outside the classroom, stretching therefore the boundaries of monolingual teaching. Such practice comes from a complex of professional/linguistic inferiority, since a native speaker's English and teaching methods will always be regarded as a model to follow by the non-native teacher. This attitude inevitably reinforces "the authority of the native-speaker teacher, the foreign expert, and the English-language publisher" (Cook, 2007: 399), and at the same time neglects the linguistic identity of the students.

Discussing the implications of such practices of discouraging the mother tongue in foreign language classes, Guy Cook emphasises that: "A person who is banned from the use of their first language is disempowered, infantilised, frustrated, deprived of their identity and knowledge." (Cook, 2007: 399) This aspect is at odds with the demands of our globalised world which place great emphasis on multiculturalism, on respecting people's diversity and the languages of all communities.

In the 1990s, the idea that "language doesn't exist outside a cultural context" (Perkins, 1988: 25) was taken into consideration by researchers in language teaching, who began to focus on the close connection between language and culture. The introduction of the cultural dimension challenged the communicative approach, because the goal of language teaching is no longer the development of students' skills to interact with speakers of the target language, but the development of intercultural communicative competence which will enable learners to build relationships "with people from another country and culture in a foreign language" (Byram, 1997: 71). The goal of intercultural teaching is "to develop learners as **intercultural speakers** or **mediators** who are able to engage with complexity and multiple identities and to avoid the stereotyping which accompanies perceiving someone through a single identity" (Byram, Gribkova & Starkey, 2002: 9). From this perspective, the age of banning the mother tongue and translation in the classroom is or should be coming to an end, since learners' first language is part of their cultural and linguistic identity which should be valued and related to in the process of acquiring a second language.

Translation as a teaching method

For long, teachers have tried to keep first and second languages apart, whereas students have always counted on their connection (Widdowson, 2003: 150). The fall of the "monolingual doctrine" has contributed to "the rise of contemporary bi-/multilingual teaching approaches" (Bazani, 2019 :8) which acknowledge the fact that students acquire a new language by relating it to a familiar one, most probably the mother tongue. As Carreres points out, "translation into L2 can help them [the learners] systematize and rationalise a learning mechanism that is taking place anyway" (Carreres, 2006: 6). Cook

stresses the idea that students seek translations even if these are banned in class; and, indeed, they use bilingual dictionaries or ask friends in order to clarify the meaning of certain words (Cook, 2007: 397). When confronted with texts, learners "will naturally seek to interpret them, and in so doing instinctively, and unavoidably, make reference to their own linguacultural reality" (House, 2018: 153). Introducing translation activities into English classes is not so much a way of making a natural, but "hidden" practice perfectly "legal", but a wise approach of making use of students' previous knowledge and linguistic experience built with Romanian/ their first language.

The learning process can benefit extensively from the act of translating because this "requires very careful attention to both form and meaning in the source language in order to 'transfer' the meaning into other forms in another language" (Machida, 2011: 742). Thus, when translating from English into Romanian, students need to understand the text very well, to search for the right equivalent of English words in Romanian, and then to check whether the translation conveys the same message as the original text. This process entails practice on word forms, morphology, syntax, style, register, genre, and also calls upon students' previous knowledge of cultural issues. Therefore, it is clear that "translation can be an aid in teaching English" (Petrocchi, 2014: 95). When done as a pair/group activity, translation also triggers discussions among participants who exchange their knowledge, ideas, perspectives, and try to reach an agreement regarding the final version of their translation, and to assess its quality. From this perspective, the act of translating becomes a communicative activity.

Teachers may design translation activities based on analyses of bilingual texts. Students have the possibility to understand new language items by drawing on "the similarities and differences between the native and foreign language systems as well as conventional uses of these systems in different situations, genres, and text types" (House, 2018: 147). Thus, the contrastive analysis of texts written in English and Romanian helps students' general understanding of grammar rules, and enhances their awareness of cross-cultural aspects, since texts mirror cultural contexts, ideas, convictions, habits etc. By observing texts and pragmatic equivalents between English and Romanian, learners will also be able to figure out the communicative functions of the language forms they have acquired.

Working on translations in the class does not mean going back to the old practices of the Grammar-Translation Method; instead, it implies using the pragmatic component of translation activities in order to develop students' communication skills. Juliane House underlines this idea: "If translation is used for establishing pragmatic equivalences by relating linguistic forms to their communicative functions, it may fulfil an important role in making learners communicatively competent." (House, 2018: 148) As Igor Arranz points out, in the foreign language classroom, translation does not have to be regarded as **an end** in itself, because it risks turning into a boring, tedious activity; alternatively, it should be used as **a means/method** of improving learners' receptive and productive skills for communicative purposes (Arranz, 2004: 239).

Translation is a skill that is worth developing in class, because it will definitely be useful for the world outside the classroom. As House points out, translation does not belong solely to the field of translators; it is used by everybody when interpreting someone else's spoken or written discourse (House, 2018: 152). It is used in personal life for immigrant or mixed families; in social circumstances when a person has better knowledge of a foreign language than other people; in professional environments where bilingual employees are highly valued; in political contexts as the base of international

cooperation (Cook, 2007: 398). All these aspects function as positive motivating factors for learners who know that translation is relevant to their personal and professional life. From this perspective, Guy Cook suggests that translation "should surely be added to the traditional list of four skills: reading, writing, listening, speaking – and translating" (Cook, 2007: 397). All these competences need to be addressed equally in a course design, for "approaching skills in segregation will hinder the outcome of communication in the foreign language" (Boncea, 2022: 186). Moreover, mediating between speakers of different languages raises intercultural awareness, an argument that reinforces the idea that translation is a necessary skill that should be developed in the process of acquiring a foreign language.

An argument against the use of translation in class is that such an activity is dull, hard, time-consuming, in short highly demotivating and useless, since "the student can never attain the level of accuracy or stylistic polish of the version presented to them by the teacher" (Carreres, 2006: 6). Such a drawback can be overcome by introducing translation activities that stimulate learners' debates. From my experience as a teacher, students indeed consider that translations are difficult, but challenging at the same time, and are therefore happy to deal with them from time to time. I would therefore argue that translation activities should be used judiciously and should not be overused; otherwise, they might become a burden. At the same time, translating from English into Romanian or vice versa can be highly rewarding, as students experience a feeling of great achievement after having done a quality translation. Undoubtedly, this feeling comes to increase their motivation and to build their confidence in translations as being useful for their studies.

Since motivation is key in the process of learning, it is worth stressing the idea that the use of the mother tongue creates a relaxed and positive learning environment, as it reduces the stress and anxieties associated with new, perhaps difficult to understand issues. Since Romanian is not banned in the classroom, students do not have to worry that they will not understand the explanations of new language items in English, or that they will not be able to express themselves appropriately. At the same time, the explicit use of the mother tongue constitutes "a sign of appreciation of learners' previous knowledge", ensures "continuity of learners' linguacultural development" (House, 2018: 147), and expresses a form of respect towards learners' own linguistic and cultural identity.

Translation can also be valuable as a teaching technique, not only because it comes natural to bilingual teachers (Cook, 2007: 397), but also because it saves time, offers better understanding of tasks, and, most importantly, gives teachers the possibility of explaining language items by referring to students' prior language knowledge, which constitutes a solid foundation for future learning. Translations provide quick and exact explanations, thus reducing confusion and minimising errors. Translation activities in class have therefore the potential of developing students' linguistic proficiency.

To sum up, the pedagogical use of translation in the process of teaching/learning a language comes as an acknowledgement that translation is not wrong; on the contrary, it is a natural activity that can help students and teachers alike.

Conclusion

In the context of our globalised world, translation is regarded more and more as a general activity that helps people make meaning across languages and cultures alike, with the aim of communicating with each other and building human relationships. We

all try to understand and represent new information by relating it to something familiar, that is, to our previous knowledge and system of values. In terms of foreign language education, teachers need to relate new content to what students already know which is rooted in their mother tongue. Therefore, the use of the first language should not be dismissed in the classroom, but exploited as a valuable linguistic resource and integrated into a process of continuous learning.

Translation, regarded for over a century as alien to language communication, needs to be reintegrated into teaching activities not only because it is a natural process that goes on in learners' minds no matter what teachers might say, but also because it provides a great tool for new language and culture comprehension. International communication relies heavily on translation capabilities; therefore, teachers should focus on guiding students to acquire this valuable skill which will help them become true intercultural speakers.

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