Using translation in foreign language teaching

Abstract:

The article argues in favour of using translation in teaching foreign languages. It also overviews a selection of activities that can be used to develop translation skills. It relies on the author’s research outcomes and personal experience as a teacher of English as a foreign language.

Keywords: translation, foreign language teaching, awareness raising, L1 interference

Translation studies have become a respectful academic discipline. Yet, using translation in foreign language teaching seems to be something that is frowned upon. It is common knowledge that translation into and out of the mother tongue is not held in high esteem in foreign language teaching and, at school, it still seems to be something most teachers are reluctant to admit using as most of active English language teachers were educated within the communicative approach universe where translation was, to a great extent, taboo.

This paper reviews reasons why translation fell out of favour in foreign, especially English, language teaching (FLT) and then it presents arguments why the skill of translation deserves to be reintroduced into the language classroom, both as an effective means of achieving linguistic proficiency, and as a skill in its own right.

1. The Infamous Grammar Translation Method

Translation from and into a target language has been present in foreign language teaching from at least the Renaissance but the bad name it still has is the aftermath of the Grammar Translation Method – “the stereotype of the use of translation in language teaching” (Cook 1998, 117) – predominant in language education till the 1960s. It began in Prussia at the end of the 18th century as a simple approach appropriate for a growing number of children who had to pass an increasing number of formal written examinations at that time. Till 1800 most language learners were people who had been trained in classical languages and their grammars and who knew how to
apply that knowledge to the interpretation of texts with the use of a dictionary. As Howatt puts it, the Grammar Translation Method “was an attempt to adapt these traditions to the circumstances and requirements of schools. It preserved the basic framework of grammar and translation because these were already familiar both to teachers and pupils from their classical studies. Its principal aim, ironically enough in view of what was to happen later, was to make language learning easier” (Howatt 2004, 151-152).

New grammar rules were explained in L1 and illustrated by the examples in the target language. There was also a list of vocabulary with translations to be used in sentences for both into and out of the target language. Textbooks were organized in sets of target language structures with supposedly increasing complexity to demonstrate linguistic features. The method completely neglected spoken language as it aimed at preparing learners for reading foreign language texts in the original. As the routine became more and more fossilized and exemplary sentences less and less linked to real life, the method underwent fierce criticism. What is more, a growing demand for oral communication skills promoted new methods and approaches in which the use of translation and/or students’ mother tongue was either totally forbidden - the Direct Method with the no translation under any circumstances commandment or at least significantly reduced – the Communicative Approach where translation was used merely “to make sure that the learners understand what they are doing”. (Howatt 2004, 259) For detailed review of teaching methods see Howatt with Widdowson (2004), Richards and Rodgers (2001) or Laviosa (2014) for the review focused on attitudes to translation.

Nowadays, the attitude pendulum seems to swing again towards the acceptance position. Teachers, at least those still remembering their ELT methodology courses, reluctantly admit that they use translation in class – a few words now and then as a five-minute test, or a few sentences to make a unit test easier or more demanding, a passage from a coursebook to give a student a quick grade – are probably the most common ways of application of translation in the present language classroom. Unfortunately, these activities frequently resemble the worst features of the Grammar Translation method and might be justly criticized.

2. Arguments against translation in FLT

In the foreword to Alan Duff’s ELT resource book, Alan Maley sums up what still tends to be an official attitude to translation of most of the English language teaching community at least in Europe:
Translation has long languished as a poor relation in the family of language teaching techniques. It has been denigrated as ‘uncommunicative’, ‘boring’, ‘pointless’, ‘difficult’, ‘irrelevant’, and the like, and has suffered from too close an association with its cousin Grammar. Along with its other traditional cousins Literature, Dictation, Vocabulary, Reading Aloud, etc., it has been pushed into the methodological lumber room. (1989, 3)

The arguments most often put forward against using translation in foreign language teaching concern the drawbacks related to degenerated application of the grammar translation method. Although the method itself is long gone, what seems to remain in teaching practice of many teachers is the sentences that students are required to translate into the target language to practice or prove that they have mastered a given grammatical structure. Such sentences are frequently out of any communicative context and tend to focus on syntactic or lexical traps rather than the message. It is not surprising that, in this form, translation tasks have become “a pointless routine exercise, a chore, and a punishment” (Duff 1989, 5).

When translation goes beyond single sentences, it is associated with long passages taken from literary or scientific texts which rarely prove suitable for classroom use with people at lower proficiency levels that constitute a vast majority of foreign language learners.

Traditionally, translation is text-bound and restricted to only two skills – reading and writing. Because of that, it is hardly a communicative activity since it does not involve any oral interaction. As translation is perceived as the individual work of a student, it is not really suitable or useful as a classroom technique. What is more, teachers and students find it boring and time-consuming both to do and to correct.

The aforementioned problems concerning using translation in the classroom seem to be able to be rather straightforwardly solved with a careful and purposeful choice of texts for translation. What appears to be a set of more serious arguments put forward against translation is that relating to the first language overuse. That leads to mother tongue dependency when learners and/or teachers “cannot function in a second or foreign language classroom without it” (Kerr 2011) as they seem to feel that without translating, they are unable to understand any item of language they encounter.

Overuse of translation might also promote negative L1 transfer especially when students (and sometimes teachers) fail to notice distinctions of form and semantic equivalence or pragmatic features. That, in turn, may lead to oversimplifications of various kinds and,
subsequently, to translation that is inaccurate in terms of, for example, connotation, pragmatics or figurative use. (Atkinson 1987, 246)

The aforesaid shortcomings of the use of translation in foreign language teaching seem to be present in classrooms where teachers themselves have learnt the language in the formal environment heavily influenced by the Grammar Translation Method, or, which is more often the case, have not been offered any alternative translation tasks to be used with their students that would be based on, or involve, more communicative aspects of translation.

3. Arguments for translation in FLT

In its traditional form, translation might be viewed as an artificial, purposeless exercise that has no application in a communicative methodology as it has little application in real world thus it is unsuitable for an average learner with neither erudite nor literary inclinations. However, there is much more to translation than just literary passages. When considered to be just one of teaching techniques, the benefits appear to outnumber the problems.

When working on translation, students develop three qualities Duff claims to be “essential to all language learning: accuracy, clarity and flexibility” (1989, 7). Tasks that focus on translation enhance these qualities because “it trains the learner to search (flexibility) for the most appropriate words (accuracy) to convey what is meant (clarity)” (ibid.) This is one of the main reasons why translation, especially that from the target language into students’ mother tongue should be reinstated in the language classroom as just another language learning activity and teachers should feel free to use it the way they “might use literature, drama, project work, conversation, role play, writing or class readers for practice and improvement” (ibid., 8, emphasis removed). Such a treatment of translation calls for a variety of translating tasks – the time when the only translation activity students encounter involves time-consuming tedious writing of long passages should be long gone. What is more, the translated passage is no longer the focal point of a translating activity – the focus has been shifted towards the reasoning behind linguistic choices that are being made. In his blog Kerr (2011) is fairly explicit maintaining that

Traditional approaches to translation have usually focused on the product of the translating process: the final, ‘correct’ translated text. In more contemporary approaches (including mine), the focus is on the process of translating itself. In some ways, the ‘correct’ answer is not really important: much more relevant are the learning opportunities that may be provided along the way towards an appropriate translation.
Needless to say that students’ linguistic competence and needs are to be taken into account when choices of tasks are being made. Nonetheless, whatever their linguistic competence is, translation seems to develop a variety of abilities. First of all, it definitely broadens and deepens students’ lexicon. Thoughtfully designed tasks contribute to the increased awareness of language-specific collocations, existence of false cognates as well as single words and multi-words units that can have more than one rendering in the target language. Students at all proficiency levels make mistakes resulting from multiple equivalence – “faulty one-to-one correspondences” that occur when “the learner of a foreign language has internalized the most common and frequent meaning of a word but not all of its potential meanings (Kussmaul 1995, 21). In similar vein, Wróblewski (2010) specifies that these errors involve lexical items that have at least two meanings, one of which is fairly well known, while the other one (ones) is (are) somewhat less popular, and the translators [students] focused on the one meaning that they already knew, did not think that the words might mean something else as well, and did not think of rechecking them in an appropriate dictionary (Wróblewski 2010, 56).

Zabawa (2013, 262) illustrates these errors with examples from literary translations of his undergraduate students who translated antique as starożytne/antyczne (antique) where the meaning was wiekowy/prastary (ancient/very old) or limbs as kończyny (libs) where the context was for konary (branches).

Students, especially at elementary level, resort to translation when they encounter collocations such as make the bed or take pictures because firstly, they do not possess other strategies, they are only to be taught or developed. Secondly, it lessens the processing effort needed, for example, to encode grammatical structures in terms of tense, aspect, etc.

Current trends in teaching vocabulary insist on teaching it as phrases rather than separate words, thus the focus on collocations, especially of delexicalised words (words that acquire their meaning from words they collocate with, for example, do, make, put, way, etc.). It seems difficult to find a teacher who has not been asked what make/take/mind mean or been told something along the lines ‘but make means robić so why do we say make the bed?’. Contrastive and translation tasks might be one more technique to aid students in making sense of foreign vocabulary.

It goes without saying that speakers of foreign languages have their mother tongue that shapes their way of thinking and their way of
using the foreign language. Translation might help students to be more aware of that influence and “to correct errors of habit that creep in unnoticed (such as the misuse of particular words or structures). And, because translation involves contrast, it enables us to explore the potential of both languages – their strengths and weaknesses” (Duff 1989, 6). In the same vein Laviosa claims after Malmkjær (1998) that “when translating, in fact, students become aware of positive and negative interference between languages and develop the ability to control it” (2014, 27).

The awareness of similarities and differences between students’ mother tongue and the foreign language they are learning is one of the crucial factors if one agrees with Duff’s statement that “translation is a natural and necessary activity. More so, indeed, than many of the fashionable activities invented for language learners”. (1989, 6). It takes place on a daily basis outside the classroom and, he concludes, there should also be a place for it inside the classroom. What is more, “language competence is a two-way, not a one-way system. We need to be able to communicate both ways: into and from the foreign language (ibid.) language courses and foreign language coursebooks focus on the competence in L2, whereas little, though justifiably, support is given in terms of “how to communicate back into their mother tongue as many professionals need to do in their daily work” (Duff 1989, 6). Translation might be beneficial in developing this skill, especially at intermediate and higher levels of proficiency as authentic material of all styles and registers can be used.

Texts can serve as material both for reading comprehension tasks as well as for discussion on their rendering into the mother tongue. Zabawa (2013) points out that “it is very rarely the case that only one translation is possible in given circumstances” (2013, 260) and, although he comments on translation errors made by university students doing a translation course, his observation should be considered working to students’ advantage for any general language course, especially in relation to translation into the mother tongue. Working on translation tasks develops creativity and sensitivity to nuances in the language. Duff argues that translation “by its very nature, invites speculation and discussion” (1989, 7).

Furthermore, it also strengthens the awareness that one-to-one correspondence is not always possible and the result of English into Polish translations might be calques from English: Zapach zlapał jego uwage - it was the smell that first caught his attention (Zabawa 2013, 264). If students increase their sensitivity to such errors in their
mother tongue, there might be a possibility that they would, at least, realize that these errors occur also when they translate into L2.

Such errors lend themselves to awareness-raising discussions on word for word translation into and out of the target language as well as a task in which students are asked to correct them. The oft-cited thank you from the mountain for thank you in advance, even if they might not make students remember the in advance phrase, it should at least make them stop to think. It appears to be confirmed by research where

Cross-linguistic information makes learners notice the target vocabulary by associating it with the corresponding L1 item. Translation requires stretching learners’ linguistic resources, since they cannot avoid problematic words. Also, translation tasks present a high involvement load since they combine ‘need’ (there can be no avoidance strategies), ‘search for meaning’ (in L1 translation), ‘search for form’ (in L2 translation) and ‘evaluation’ of several alternatives before making the final choice (Laufer and Girsai 2008: 711—12)

A common perception of translation is that it is a skill essential to those students who are taught to be professional translators and interpreters. As such, it is an end/product rather than a means/process in a foreign language classroom restricted to a relatively small number of foreign language learners. Yet, research shows that in students’ perception, using translation as a language activity appears “to be at odds with the line of [traditional] pedagogical research that dismissed it as utterly useless and even damaging” (Carreres 2006, 7). It is in accord with Cook stating that “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” (2010: 109). Students themselves often find translation a useful technique because it caters for learning styles preferred by those

who shy away from communicative tasks, such as open-ended and unpredictable role play, because these activities challenge their self-image. In particular, translation is perceived to be a task that meets the need for confidence and self-esteem as well as the need not to lose face. (Laviosa after Sewell (2004), 2014, 28)

Translation might be personally rewarding as it is usually a result of individual efforts and it may also be regarded as promotion of learner’s autonomy. What is more, translation appears to be as good a solution as any other for reflecting personal preferences (for example, those based on the Multiple Intelligences theory). As Laviosa
puts it: “while role-play situations seem to suit risk-taking and extrovert personalities, translation seems to favour reflection and introverted personality traits, since it involves low levels of interaction”. (Laviosa 2014, 28). For further research results see, inter alia, Carreres (2006), Laufer and Girsai (2008) or Visintin (2011); for the review of up-to-date research see Laviosa (2014).

4. A selection of translation tasks

The syllabus and/or the students’ needs may require to work on material that “illustrate particular aspects of language and structure with which the students have difficulty in English (for instance, prepositions, articles, if-clauses, the passive). By working through these difficulties in the mother tongue, the students come to see the link between language (grammar) and usage” (Duff 1989, 7). Polish students, for example, often have problems with the passive sentences such as she is given ....

Translation is still used as a testing technique. For instance, in Poland in two school leaving exams there are questions where students are required to translate parts of a sentence. This is why current coursebooks used in Polish middle high and secondary schools contain numerous tasks with partial translation. They focus either on grammatical structures or lexical items or combine both. The rationale behind it is that students need to overcome the urge for direct language transfer as the items used in tests are usually linguistic traps for Polish speakers of English.

In 2016 the exam for middle high schools contained the following sentences: (Czy musiałeś) _____ leave so early in the morning?; Czy interesujesz się _____ in modern art by any chance? (Did you have to; Are you interested). For learners of Russian, the questions contained the following expressions: mam na imię; ty masz (My name’s; you have). In both languages, direct translations do not result in correct expressions. The secondary school exam in 2016 used a multiple choice type of task and the students were to decide which is the correct English equivalent:

You look tired. You can hardly breathe. (Biegałeś?)
A) Have you been running? 
B) Are you going to run
C) Had you run

The two exams employ somewhat traditional translating tasks, however, they still might be viewed as attempts to avoid translation
for its own sake if not making it more communicative. It is in accordance with Maley’s statement that “In foreign language teaching there has been a shift in emphasis from “learning” translation as a set of discrete skills to using translation as a resource for the promotion of language learning” (Maley in Duff 1987, 3, original emphasis). The higher the level of students’ proficiency, the more translation becomes a tool for foreign language development. Translation “might profitably be used as one among several methods of actually teaching language, rather than as mere preparation for an examination” (Malmkjær 1998, 9, original emphasis) provided the tasks used in the classroom bear a close resemblance to real-life translations.

One of the most commonly used tasks is when the teacher chooses a passage for translation, collects the translations and then redistributes them a few days later to be translated back into L2. The versions are then compared to the original and discussed.

One of the tasks might be a variation of Chinese whispers game. The teacher whispers a phrase or a sentence to a Student 1 who then translates it into L1 and whispers the translation to Student 2. Student 2, in turn, translates it back into L2 and passes it on to the next student, etc. If the original and the end versions are different, students decide where the mistakes are.

Speaking activities that usually take the form of a simple roleplay are an inseparable part of any language course. They might be modified now and then to accommodate a translation factor – an interpreter is added. Then one of the roles is acted out in students’ mother tongue and the interpreter translates the conversation.

An interesting and motivating type of activities are short films or film extracts available on the Internet. Students focus on dialogues and their task is to prepare subtitles for the extract. Later on they might be compared with the original or voted for the best one. If the multimedia equipment is available, students may watch the extract with their own subtitles. Another idea of using film extracts is watching an extract with a sound off but with L1 subtitles. The task is to work out what is actually being said. Another way of working with films suggested by Kerr (2011) is chuchotage (lectoring) – a voice-over simultaneous translation that is used on TV, for example, in Poland. Again, a short clip is chosen and students prepare their mother tongue voice-over script, preferably, as Kerr comments, without notes taken. Then they deliver the voice-over. With carefully selected clips, it is supposed to work the other way round – students prepare L2 voice-over.
5. Conclusions

Taking into account demands for people being able to translate, especially into English, it seems natural that foreign language classes should equip their students both in oral communication skills and translation skills into and out of their mother tongue. In an increasingly globalized environment and accessibility of online information where one encounters a foreign language both in their own country or abroad, the need to translate on a daily basis in various situations, both formal and informal, appears to be growing.

Whether encouraged or not, translation is one of the most frequently used strategies applied by foreign language learners. This is why they need support from teachers if they are to develop the skills of translation correctly and to their benefit. It cannot be forgotten though that translation in language teaching has by no means the objective of educating translators; rather it is an activity which might stimulate the cognitive potential of an adult or adolescent learner and is thus supposed to complement other activities, not to replace them (Witte et al., 2009: 2 in Laviosa 2014, 29)

A selection of both material and tasks is important as translation should be a challenge, but, at the same time, cannot be either too demanding or too long. It is supposed to be a manageable and rewarding tool enhancing learning, a springboard for discussion rather than a boring time-consuming writing task inducing in learners a sense of disappointment punishment.

Discussion over choices and reasoning is crucial, more important sometimes than the number of sentences or the product itself. Justification of options forces students to use their linguistic resources to the fullest. That, in turn, prompts a deeper analysis of both similarities and differences between the given languages and builds language awareness. Consequently they become more competent and autonomous language learners.

References: