



Reasons to Use Translation in ELT

As anyone involved in ELT soon comes to realise, the profession is plagued by dogmatic opinions: you, the teacher, *must* do this, but you *must not* do that!! Yet, when probed, these diktats often turn out to be mere opinion – and not only opinion, but opinionated.

Among these insubstantial dogmas is one which has been ascendant and persistent for almost 150 years. This is the widespread belief that a language is best taught through the medium of that language itself, without reference to, or use of, the students' own languages. So strong is this belief that in many ELT contexts it is not just a recommendation but a law. There are textbooks, methods, syllabuses and organisations in which you must never use the students' own language; *absolutely everything* must be in English, always and without exception.

A catalogue of crimes

In this extreme monolingualist view, all of the many ways in which students' own language might well be profitably used – to explain, to comment, to establish relationships, to manage the classroom – are wrong. Yet there is one bilingual activity which has been singled out as particularly villainous. This is translation. Although it continues to be used in many contexts, in the mainstream ELT literature, at least until very recently, translation has simply been dismissed on all of the following charges:

- it impedes acquisition and fluency
- it creates a sense of false equivalence
- it is academic and impractical
- it is dull and boring and old-fashioned
- it is alien to real language use and communication
- it is a sign of teacher laziness
- and students hate it!

So widespread and accepted have these views been that in many quarters they have been asserted without evidence. So a problem for those, like me, who disagree with these charges, and regard translation as a valuable pedagogic strategy, is that it is actually very hard to find coherent arguments to counter. The conviction that translation is wrong has simply been taken for granted.

Very briefly, in this article, I want to set out some reasons to disagree.

Opposition is often historical and practical

Much of the most vehement condemnation of translation dates back to the nineteenth century. When picked apart, it turns out not to be opposition to translation itself, but to one particular use of it: Grammar Translation. This was a method which focused almost entirely upon written accuracy achieved through the accumulation of staged grammar rules and vocabulary, and then tested student knowledge through the tedious translation of invented sentences – back and forth between the two languages. For the 19th century apostles of *Direct Method*, such as Maximillian Berlitz, Grammar Translation was an easy target to attack and replace. Yet the reasons for the rise and success of Direct Method were more practical, political, and commercial than theoretical or pedagogic. In the new language schools for business people and tourists, and in classes for immigrants to English-speaking countries, it was simply not possible to use translation. Either the class had speakers of too many different languages or, while the students all spoke the same language, the teacher only spoke English. The same was often true of the lessons delivered by the new wave of young



native-speaker teachers flooding out through the world from the English speaking countries from the 1960s onwards, who were believed to be better models than their nonnative counterparts. When non-native teachers used translation to help their students, this was seen as a weakness rather than a strength. The resultant monolingualism often had an unpleasant chauvinistic edge. It was as though the identities and languages of the students were to be ousted rather than complemented by English.

For us in the multicultural world of 2014 (rather than the nationalistic Europe and USA of the 1870s or the paternalist 1960s) there are reasons to prefer a very different approach: one which values and promotes a cross-linguistic multicultural world in which English is learned not to promote its own system and identities, but to be part of, and safeguard, the complex bilingual and bicultural identities and languages of others too.

Translation is real, necessary, and communicative

One of the oddest myths is that translation is an artificial academic exercise remote from real communication. Authentic communicative translation – even if it is only the occasional odd word or phrase – happens wherever there are speakers of more than one language with differential knowledge. Thus there is translation in mixed-language families, or in families whose home language is not that of the majority outside. Granny and Grandad may need a younger generation to help them with filling in a form, and *vice versa* a grandchild is travelling back *home*. And translation will be needed when relatives or friends come to stay – even if it's only of a restaurant menu. Schools with a multilingual catchment translate documents for parents and provide new arrivals with *buddy* interpreters. Any mixed language workforce is going to need some translation. In our globalised economies there is translated information all around us: food labels, airport announcement, subtitles. And all this before we even consider formal interpreting and translation; an activity on which international communication still depends. In short, translation is a widely practised and needed communicative activity.

In this context the implicit assumption of monolingual instruction that students are learning English only to operate in monolingual environments is quite bizarre. A person who gets a job on the strength of their proficiency in English will very likely be expected to translate for colleagues whose level of English is lower. It is a necessary and authentic skill.

There is no evidence that translation impedes acquisition or fluency

This myth is unsubstantiated – though it is often linked to the discredited belief in early second language acquisition theory (SLA) that exposure to meaningful input is all that is needed, that conscious learning and explicit comparison of languages is ineffective, and that the learner's first language is irrelevant. Yet until very recently, there has been no SLA research on translation, and it doesn't figure at all in the SLA textbooks. So strangely, it seems that a field which prides itself on its scientific credentials, and the rigorous testing of hypotheses, did absolutely nothing to assess one of the most ancient, widespread and natural ways to approach a new language.

Translation is not dull

In pedagogic research a similarly untested assumption has been that students actively dislike translation. This might have been true of many reactions to Grammar Translation, but is no longer necessarily the case. Contrary to the myth, recent investigations of what students actually think have found that what many of them dislike is monolingual instruction. And there are lots of authentic ways of building translation into enjoyable communicative tasks and activities. Moreover, now that the taboo on discussing own-language use is finally being lifted, a good deal of evidence suggests that students feel more relaxed and positive when they are allowed to make use of their own language in bilingual activities – of which translation is one. (See the references below.)



Translation is more useful than ever

We live in a globalised multilingual world of multimedia communication across distances, cultures and languages in which people need English but do not necessarily want or need to abandon their existing identity and language. The old notion that one learns English to go to an English-speaking country and blend in unobtrusively with a monolingual community, speaking English without reference to one's own language, is simply both out of date and undesirable.

Further reading:

Cook, G (2010) *Translation in Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Davies, M G (2004) *Multiple Voices in the Translation Classroom: Activities, tasks and projects*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.

Deller, S and Rinvulcri, M (2002) *Using the Mother Tongue*. London: English Teaching Professional and Delta Publishing.

Duff, A (1989) *Translation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hall, G and Cook, G (2012) 'Own language use in language teaching and learning: the state of the art', *Language teaching* 45, 3, pp. 271-308.

Widdowson, H G (2003) 'Bilingualization and Localized Learning'. In *Defining Issues in English Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 149-164.

Wolfgang, B and Caldwell, J (2009) *The Bilingual Reform: A Paradigm Shift in Foreign Language Teaching*. Tübingen: Narr Studienbücher.