

## INTERCULTURAL DIMENSIONS IN LANGUAGE TEACHING – THE FUNCTION OF PEDAGOGICAL TRANSLATION

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**Abstract:** Language teaching professionals acknowledge that teaching foreign languages aims at going beyond the acquisition of grammar content and the simple mastery of grammar skills, the weighty yearning being the accurate and appropriate use of language in order to communicate meaning in real situations. This is one of the reasons accounting for the long-lasting debate on the primacy of the most suitable language teaching method. The communicative language teaching approach has lately opposed to the traditional structural view and has included a wide range of methods mainly based on situational language teaching and audio-lingual methods so as to achieve a more complete communicative perspective. Whether written or oral, any communication act occurring in a language shall be achieved not only by using a range of linguistic forms, but also a set of strategies and linguistic forms adequate to concrete situations. One of the most characteristic feature of translation as a means of communicative language teaching is that it provides the systematic attention needed to be paid to both functional and structural aspects of language. It helps attaining one of the most important criteria of successful communication, namely not only conveying an intended meaning but also producing an accurate and appropriate stretch of discourse. By thoroughly pleading for implying translation as a convenient form of cross-cultural transmission of language in the process of foreign language learning/teaching, this article aims at highlighting the linking role translation plays in forming the relationship between linguistic/structural and communicative forms, more often than non-linguistic realities, as well as in raising learners' awareness of meaning and cross-cultural differences.

**Keywords:** communicative method, extra-linguistic factors, cross-lingual interaction, language proficiency.

### 1. AN OUTLINE OF TRANSLATION

As acknowledged by Vanessa Leonardi, the term translate “has Latin and Greek roots and its basic meaning is that of carrying something across”<sup>1</sup> (see Latin

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<sup>1</sup> Vanessa Leonardi, *The Role of Pedagogical Translation in Second Language Acquisition. From Theory to Practice*, Berlin: Peter Lang AG, 2010, p. 65.

*transfere* and Greek *metapherein*). At various periods of human culture (mainly European and American culture) certain types of approaching translation have emerged, hence determining a kind of variation in the role and function of translation. A diachronic study of translation would naturally begin with Cicero. Either literal expounding or free adaptation, translation started to be practiced as early as the Roman times, when its main functions were to be identified in training grammar and rhetoric, translation itself being hypothetically claimed to be a Roman invention.<sup>2</sup> The essential heritage left to be further explored by later translators mainly consists in *De optimo genere oratorum* (Cicero), *Ars poetica* (Horace) and *Letter to Pammachius* (St Jerome), with the translation theories and statements emerging directly from the practical work of translating.

According to T. R. Steiner's periodization, the second stage runs up to the forties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Both in the Middle Ages and early Renaissance, translation continued to be performed in the tradition of textual interpretation and commentary, its main purpose being didactic, "with the moralisation overriding other considerations"<sup>3</sup>, as shown in such treatises as *La manière de bien traduire d'une langue en autre* (1540) by Etienne Dolet and *Ars poetique* (1555) by Jacques Peletier. In the medieval educational system, translation was an important component, seen as a means of improving the oratorical style and as a written exercise.

Due to the inventions of printing techniques, significant changes were to be brought to the role and function of translation, as well as to the volume of such undertakings. Among the several attempts made to develop a vocabulary and methodology in approaching translation, Susan Bannett<sup>4</sup> outlined the five principles the French humanist Etienne Dolet suggested for the translator, namely:

- fully understand the sense and meaning of the original;
- have a perfect knowledge of both languages;
- avoid word-for-word rendering (see also Cicero and Horace);
- seize commonly used forms of speech;
- produce the correct tone by appropriate words choice and order.

Hence, translation started to be approached within attempts of developing a vocabulary and a certain methodology. This focus on the interpretative approach (inherited by Chapman and his contemporaries) "directed attention to the meanings – to the words which ought, as either representatives or explanations, to stand for the words of the original"<sup>5</sup>. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century (the Bible's versions) translation was mainly used as a tool in the fight against dogmatic and political disputes.

The following period is to be correlated with the introduction of structural linguistics and communication study while since the 1960s onwards, the act of

<sup>2</sup> Susan Bannett, *Translation Studies*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, London and New York: Routledge, 1988, p. 48.

<sup>3</sup> T.R. Steiner, *English Translation Theory 1650-1800*, Netherlands: Van Gorcum, Assen, 1975, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Susan Bannett, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

<sup>5</sup> T.R. Steiner, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

translation has included philology, literature, formal rhetoric, poetics and the study of grammar<sup>6</sup>.

Although such a temporal periodization is impeded by a set of difficulties among which the dynamic character of culture itself, such undertakings allow for useful frameworks in better understanding the evolution of the concept, by clearly underlying the aspects prevailing at different times. As Susan Banett points it out, irrespective of the clear-cut divisions of periods “*the word for word vs. the sense for sense* lines can be seen emerging again and again with different degrees of emphasis in accordance with different concepts of language and communication”<sup>7</sup>.

## 2. TRANSLATION EMPLOYED FOR PEDAGOGICAL PURPOSES

When employed for pedagogical reasons, translation becomes pedagogical, that is a useful tool meant to assist foreign language teaching and learning. Unlike real translation, pedagogical translation offers information about the language learners’ level of language proficiency. Although recalling of the much-debated Grammar Translation method, the term pedagogical translation is completely different in purpose and approach on condition extra-linguistic factors, such as culture, are taken into consideration. Quoting authors like Vanessa Leonardi, “Translation exercises can serve a variety of purposes ranging from linguistic problems to more cultural, semantic and pragmatic concerns. Furthermore, translation can help learners enhance their analytical and problem-solving skills which are essential in everyday life as well as in most working fields”<sup>8</sup>. So, pedagogical translation should not be correlated either with the Grammar Translation method or, even less, with the activity designed only for training translators as future professionals.

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, traditional methods used in teaching/learning a second language started to be improved to the point of their complete replacement nowadays. Practised over several decades with so much expected success in achieving the aimed target, the Grammar Translation method was designed to emphasize the role of translation techniques in understanding and using grammar better by creating meaning. On its turn, the Grammar-Translation Method was a modified version of the ancient Scholastic Method, which was traditionally used to study the written form of the classical languages through a thorough lexical and grammatical analysis of classic texts. This method involved, as a natural component of language learning, producing translations of parts of the original text. The main focus of such a method was on deductively learning both grammar

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<sup>6</sup> George Steiner, *After Babel*, London: Oxford University Press, 1975, p. 236 ff.

<sup>7</sup> Susan Barnett, *op. cit.*, p. 50

<sup>8</sup> Vanessa Leonardi, *op. cit.*, pp. 81-82.

and vocabulary. Without including listening and speaking activities, the Grammar Translation method often ran the risk of inducing the conclusion that the word for word/phrase for phrase translation is appropriate between languages.

Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Direct Method, “challenged the value of translation and the efficiency of formal grammar study”<sup>9</sup>, disfavouring translation for the benefit of interactions and placing listening prior to speaking.

By the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, second language was taught by means of the Audio-lingual Method. Much opposed by Chomsky’s cognitive approach<sup>10</sup>, this method was based on behaviourism with much attention paid to surface structures of the language, mainly by exposure to available language input. Chomsky’s theories occasioned the preferment of the Communicative Approach which focused on meaningful input in realistic situations. Under the Communicative Method, teaching explicit linguistic forms and the use of mother tongue are to be avoided. Still, considering the underlying reasons of most objections brought against, learners could not communicate successfully only by exposure to meaningful input alone. Recently, specialists in the field have evidence the need of including certain explicit guidelines in the communicative approach.

The way William Littlewood describes a most efficient communicator in foreign languages best fits our perception of the way translation activities assist foreign language learners/teachers: “the most efficient communicator in a foreign language is not always the person who is best at manipulating its structures; it is often the person who is most skilled at processing the complete situation involving himself and the hearer, taking account of what knowledge is already shared between them and selecting items which will communicate its message effectively”<sup>11</sup>.

According to many other well-known specialists, trainers are seen as the only responsible for their achievement of practicing the best method and translation is seen as a “legitimate pedagogical tool in foreign language teaching”<sup>12</sup>.

Duff summarizes succinctly: “Translation develops three qualities essential to all language learning: flexibility, accuracy, and clarity. It trains the learner to search (flexibility) for the most appropriate words (accuracy) to convey what is meant (clarity)”<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Harold Madsen, J Donald Bowen *et. al.*, *TESOL Techniques and Procedures*, Cambridge, MA: Newbury House Publishers, 1985, p. 20.

<sup>10</sup> Noam Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures*, Berlin: Moutan de Gruyter, 2002, p.87: “To understand a sentence, then it is necessary to reconstruct its analysis on each linguistic level; and we can test the adequacy of a given set of abstract linguistic levels by asking whether or not grammar formulated in terms of these levels enables us to provide a satisfactory analysis of the notion of understanding”.

<sup>11</sup> William Littlewood, *Communicative Language Teaching*, USA-New York: Cmabridge University Press, 1981, page 4.

<sup>12</sup> Tim Bowen, Jonathan M. Marks, *Inside Translation*, Oxford: Heinemann, 1994, p. 93.

<sup>13</sup> Alan Duff, *Translation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 7.

Many were those who pleaded for the need of grammar teaching along with the communicative task. Interpreted in structural linguistic terms, where grammar consists in morphology and syntax, without much appeal to meaning itself, grammatical structures may seem meaningless and out of the context. By practicing grammar through translation instances we can achieve the long-term challenge of understanding when to use such structures, that is, grasping the favourable discourse contexts, since the attainment of grammatical structures would be incomplete without the comprehension of their function. As Fred Eckman suggests, there are three dimensions which should not be overlooked in building discourse utterances: form, meaning and function of language. Grammar consists of arbitrary rules but its organization does not necessarily involve an arbitrary process and one of the solutions suggested by the above-mentioned author is looking at language from a discourse perspective, which allows seeing why the rules are the way they are. Due to the systematicity and order of language learners are accustomed to in their native language, they often use “certain forms erroneously by target speakers standards but consistently as a response to certain extra linguistic factors such as task demands”<sup>14</sup>. All in all, translation includes both traditional synthetic grammar teaching and the analytic approach by context using.

With much emphasis on the bilingual and cross-lingual interaction, translation supports the shift from the monolingual perspective to the understanding of the nature of native competence. Here are the three well-appreciated methods suggested by Guy Cook in support of language interaction<sup>15</sup>:

Method	Advantages
Close translation	It helps to transmit ideas as faithfully as possible
Word for word translation	It helps emphasizing the difference and similarities between common utterances in the two languages
Round the class translation building	Attention shifted to forms during communication

Another reason for introducing translation into language teaching classes is that it prevents using the learned structures only one at a time, as language acquisition is a matter of accumulating structural items, far from being uniformly and constantly used. In this way, translation provides the acquisition of structures interdependently, without omissions and time wasted for backsliding<sup>16</sup>.

Moreover, the shift towards communicative perspective has allowed learners express their own meanings, while paying less attention to errors in favour of creating opportunities to use language authentically and spontaneously. At this point, translation provides an explicit focus on the language itself and on forms.

The purpose of translation during languages classes is to help learners develop their knowledge of the second language being taught. A cognitively

<sup>14</sup> Fred Ecknen, *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 133-134.

<sup>15</sup> Guy Cook, *Translation in Language Teaching*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 127.

<sup>16</sup> William Rutherford, *Second Language Grammar Learning and Teaching*, London: Longman, 1987, p. 4.

demanding process, translation is more appropriate for adult learners but still applied at all levels and ages, if properly designed and structures. Moreover, translation activities would rather be integrated with other existing language learning/teaching practices. While attempting to provide a framework with the main stages to be used for ensuring a successful translation process, we daresay there are three kinds of activities preceding, accompanying and following translation itself, that is making up what actually constitutes pedagogical translation.

- ✓ Pre-translation activities whose main purpose is to revise grammar and vocabulary practical skills;
- ✓ Translation activities usually used for consolidation;
- ✓ Post-translation activities including such activities as rewording, reading or writing again, revision.

Within the larger purpose of integrating certain skills in order to activate schemata, pre-translation activities may consist in: discussions initiated over the topics of the day, eliciting some key words from the text to be translated, asking learners to look for equivalents, comparing results with the class.

Also considering the very same division between the three types of activities related with translation, Vanessa Leonardi devised a useful framework, as shown below:<sup>17</sup>

<b>Pre-translation activities</b>	Adequate introduction of the new vocabulary	<b>Translation activities</b>	Reading/speaking and listening and finally writing activities	<b>Post-translation activities</b>	Generating commentaries over the achieved translation
	Revision and consolidation of existing vocabulary		Literal translation		Free discussions about further related topics for improving intercultural competence
	Providing appropriate guidelines for words choice		Summary translation		Bilingual glossary creation
			Parallel texts		
			Grammar explanations		
			Bridge the gap between the two cultures		
		Intercultural awareness development			

Pedagogical translation framework, adapted from V. Leonardi, *The Role of Pedagogical Translation in Second Language Acquisition. From Theory to Practice*, 2010, p. 88.

All translation activities should mainly focus on raising awareness of the context and cultural register. For better achieving this final goal, it is recommended

<sup>17</sup> Vanessa Leonardi, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

to have translation done in groups for allowing them to compare, discuss and make necessary changes over their pieces of work. Trough post-translation activities learners' awareness of how translation is an intercultural phenomenon is at stake, that is why favourable activities would be comparisons and discussions over the differences occurring in their translations or even better, over the causes determining them. It is to be noted that radical departures from the original text such as updates, summaries, paraphrases, and popularisations in the target culture are to be avoided.

In the currently practiced post-communicative approach, translation as a teaching method has the following strengths:

- ❖ Learners are encouraged to focus not only on meaning, but also on the form of the text;
- ❖ As a working-on-text method, pedagogical translation favours discussions on linguistic and non-linguistic forms;
- ❖ It offers the unique opportunity of exploring the dimensions of both languages;
- ❖ It helps developing both skills and style of written expression beyond standard communication;
- ❖ It helps developing sensitivity to the meaning which is entirely culture-specific;
- ❖ It ensures growth in language proficiency
- ❖ It enhances learners' awareness and their understanding of the culture and society as representing the foundation of language itself.

### **3. CONCLUSIONS ON THE NEED TO ACHIEVE CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION THROUGH TRANSLATION**

Taking into account the fact that foreign language teaching/learning should not overlook the permanent linkage existing between language conceptions and human identity, translation becomes an instructional means likely to both achieve humanistic educational endeavour and provide deeply effective communicative experience. We daresay that throughout the history of translation, most approaches have tended to focus more on the linguistic side and less on extra-linguistic factors. For instance, when looking up for a definition of the concept in the dictionary, we are likely to find rather simplistic ones, such as "the activity of changing spoken or written words into a different language"<sup>18</sup> or "the process of changing something that is either written or spoken into another language"<sup>19</sup>. Far from being only a

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<sup>18</sup> Michael Rundell, *Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Leraners*, London: Macmillan Education, 2007, p. 1153.

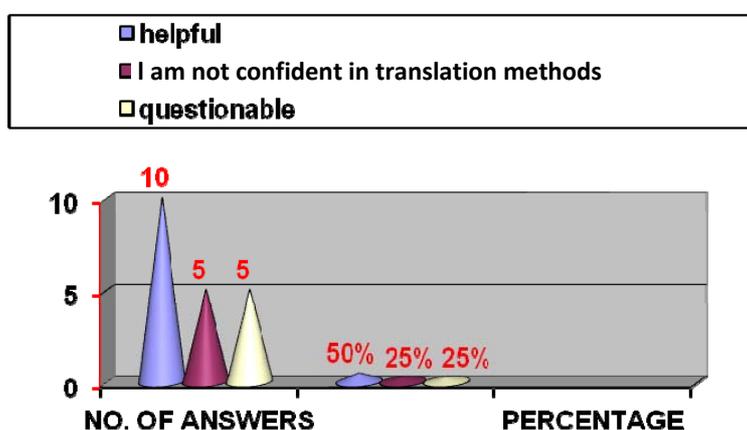
<sup>19</sup> \*\*\* *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, London: Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 1382.

linguistic act, translation operates as an act of communication across cultures. Language and culture can never be split apart and the cultural embedment of language into culture, which has to be part of any foreign language training, is best supported by translation. By transferring texts from one language into another, the meaning of linguistic items is to be understood while considered together with the cultural realities. While moved from one language to another, any communicative text will carry its cultural features along; hence the conversion of texts between languages is one act of cross-cultural communication entailing linguistic and cultural knowledge of both languages.

To conclude with, “both meaning and form will have to be analysed and assessed in order to decide what gets translated and how. Focus will be laid upon both linguistic and extra-linguistic features which, most of the time, are only superficially dealt with or completely ignored in reading activities”<sup>20</sup>.

At this point of our article, we considered it appropriate to use a quantitative method of research based on applying and interpreting the results of a survey by means of questionnaires to a sample of 20 students, whose language proficiency is satisfactory. Viewing the results of the students’ assessment of translation as a language training tool, 50% of them considered it an appropriate method, while 25% expressed their mistrust in translation tasks and the other 25% doubted whether translation could provide any progress in language training:

**Question 1. How useful do you consider pedagogical translation in improving language proficiency?**

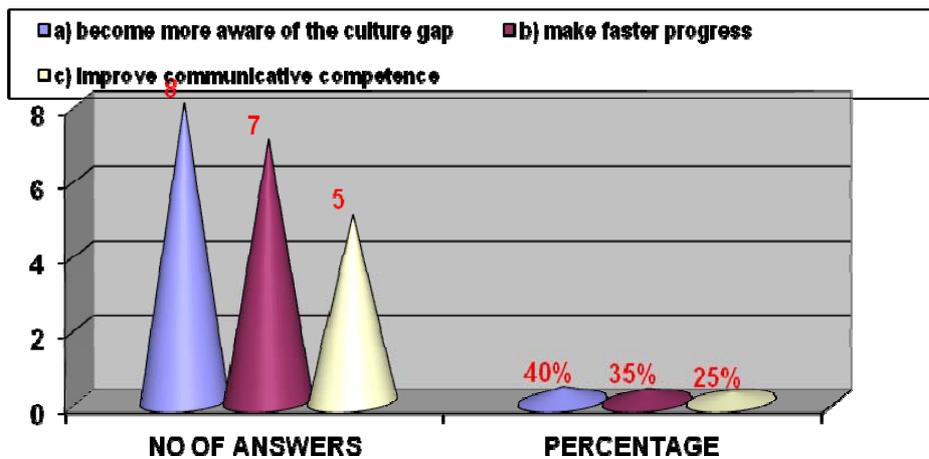


<sup>20</sup> Vanessa Leonardi, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

So far the results show that half of the interviewed have a positive attitude about such attempts.

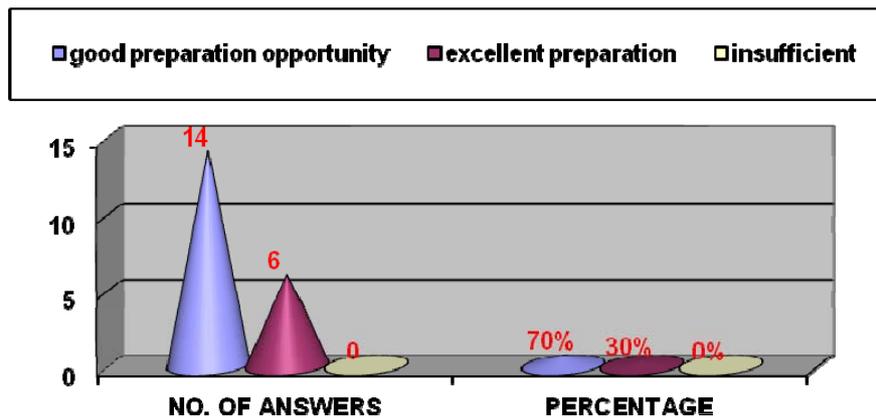
When asked about the effects they have become aware of when involved in translation activities, 40% of respondents thought about the culture gap, while 35% spoke about a faster progress and the remaining 25% chose the role translation is likely to play in improving both written and oral communication skills.

**Question 2: What are the effects of using translation to learn a foreign language (in our case English)?**



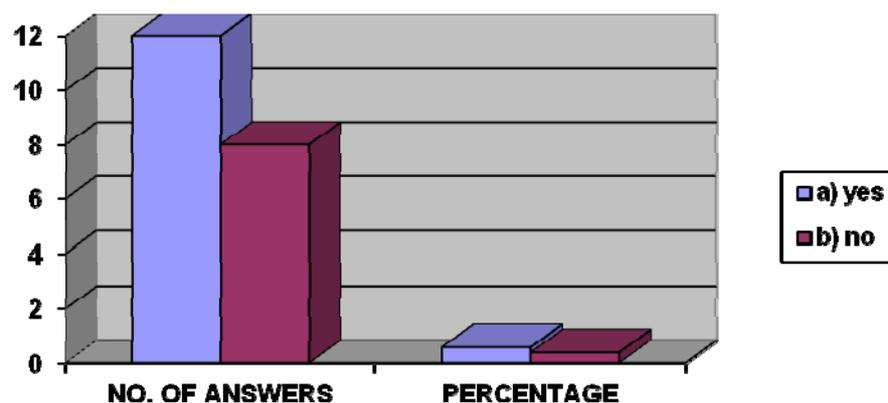
The question regarding students’ assessment of translation role in their preparation for the language competence exam reveals an overall good appreciation on their part.

**Question 3: Has translation helped you get prepared for your final language exam?**



When asked to decide whether translation activities should be excluded or not from language training classes, 12 respondents proved to be supporters of such activities while the remaining 8 gave a negative answer.

**Question 4. Should translation activities be used in the language classroom?**



Eventually, all respondents admitted they enjoyed the translation activities provided to them.

A complex activity, pedagogical translation involves both linguistic and cognitive factors but above all communicative and cultural ones. When closely related to foreign language learning, translation used with teaching/learning purposes becomes more than necessary, rather unavoidable and naturally-occurring. Only by reference to concepts derived from structural linguistics alone, translation activities would lose their complexity, well designed as both a cognitive and social activity<sup>21</sup>. To express it differently, besides its linguistic role, that of complying with both source and target language message and conventions, pedagogical translation is also a cultural activity, its role being that of mediating cultures as faithfully as possible. At the same time, translation occurs naturally, both in speech and writing, when faced with foreign words and phrases, that is, learners should be taught how to achieve an efficient rendering into the target language.

<sup>21</sup> Schäffner, C., *The Role of Discourse Analysis for Translation and Translator Training*, Clevedon-Buffalo-Toronto-Sydney: Multilingual Matters, 2002, p. 1.

## Annex 1

### QUESTIONNAIRE

**Respondent's personal data:**

**Name:**

**E-mail:**

**Phone number:**

**Questions:**

- 1. How useful do you consider pedagogical translation in improving language proficiency?**
  - a) Helpful
  - b) I am not confident enough in the translation methods
  - c) Questionable
  
- 2. What are the effects of using translation to learn a foreign language (in our case, English)?**
  - a) Become more aware of the cultures gap
  - b) Make faster progress than by using other methods
  - c) Improve communicative competence
  
- 3. Has translation helped you get prepared for your final language exam?**
  - a) Excellent preparation
  - b) Good preparation opportunity
  - c) Insufficient
  
- 4. Should translation activities be used in the language classroom?**
  - a) Yes
  - b) No
  
- 5. Did you enjoy translation activities you attended?**
  - a) Yes
  - b) No