

# Translation: A Multidimensional Task

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**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to shed light on the pedagogical function of translation, and how it can contribute to teaching or fostering language acquisition using either traditional tools of language teaching such as textbooks, and handouts, or by technological means. In this paper the role of L1 (the learner's first language) is emphasized as an assistant to second language teaching (L2). The facts presented in this article are the results of my experience working on translation shared with a group of students enrolled in the Intensive English Program before they were admitted in their major.

**Key words:** translation, pedagogical level, teaching languages

There is no doubt that in the multicultural and multilingual "global village" in which we currently live, translation cannot but play a vital role. Globalization of the world in general and the work market in particular have led to an environment without borders, in which people of multiple cultural and linguistic backgrounds interact. These individuals need to communicate, to interchange ideas, beliefs and principles but are sometimes faced with linguistic barriers while communicating. Translation is always the solution, whether directly (the act of professional translation and interpreting) or indirectly (by pedagogical translation). The purpose of this paper is to show that translation is not only a practical and efficient means of communication between cultures and civilizations, but also a multi-dimensional and multifunctional subject which can be used as a method for language teaching.

## TRANSLATION: DEFINITION

### Translation the Science

The meaning of translation has changed tremendously over the last 50 years. It is no longer simply a bridge between people with different linguistic backgrounds but also a science unto itself. With the emergence

of translation studies, translation has become an academic subject, (Holmes, 1972), and theories of translation are taught all over the world whether at the undergraduate or graduate levels. Some academic institutions which offer translation studies programs are: The University of George Washington (USA), Laval University (Canada), the Sorbonne, ESIT (France), King Fahd University (Morocco), Edinburgh University (UK), and the American University of Sharjah (United Arab Emirates). The American University of Sharjah (AUS), for example, offers an accredited Master Degree Program in Translation and Interpreting, with 36 credits, over 2 years.

### **Translation the Practice**

In this case, it is the process of translating that is in question (Munday, 2001). In other words, the translator tries to understand a text spoken or written in one language and conveys its meaning into another text spoken or written in the target language (Raddawi, 1999).

### **Translation the Product**

Once the act of translating is accomplished, the product or the result obtained is also called a translation; be this product an article, a book, a brochure or any other discourse.

## **LEVELS OF TRANSLATION**

With the focus on the disciplinary aspect of translation, we can state the 3 levels of translation (Seleskovitch & Lederer, 1986).

### **Linguistic level**

This is the first level of translation. At this stage, the translating process is done word for word, and is used at two times. First, when the translator is a beginner, they fear to veer away from the original text and therefore they comply with the contents and form of the words they are translating. Second, linguistic translation is used for comparative studies purposes. In the latter, the linguist's aim is to compare two different code systems and their functionality. This type of translation is called linguistic because it effectively represents the macro level of translation.

### **Pedagogical Level**

Translation in this case is used as a means to teach or deepen the acquisition of a language. This approach has been recently neglected due to two factors:

- The adoption of the Direct Communicative Approach to English Language Teaching in the 1970's which emphasizes the "authentic" language learning conditions in the classroom; abandoning thereby the translation process in language teaching (Gentzler, 2000).
- The autonomy of Translation as a discipline and a science. It is no more a dependent sector of Linguistics or any other field of knowledge but a science itself which is learned and taught in many world wide academic institutions.

However, the increasing focus of research on learning of vocabulary as an effective communication device (Vermeer, 1992) and the revealing results of the superiority of translation over context learning in terms of quantity (Prince, 1996), have led to a resuscitation of the role of translation in L2 learning. Moreover, throughout my experience as a language and translation instructor, I have reached the conclusion that the first language of the learner (L1) should play a role in teaching our students English or any other language considered as a second language (L2), and in fact I believe that this method could be more efficient than the communicative approach to language teaching. In order to both substantiate my personal experience and to consolidate a theoretical framework, I undertook experiments and further parallel study of the translation vs. communicative approach. The results of these experiments are discussed at length in the third section of this paper, "Pedagogical Translation: An Approach to Language Teaching."

### **Professional Level**

This is considered the highest and the third level of translation. Translation is not a means but a goal to establish communication between people with different languages and cultures. Thus, its function here is communicative and not pedagogical. It is called professional translation because the translator has taken it as a profession to convey information and bridge gaps of communication between individuals and civilizations.

## **PEDAGOGICAL TRANSLATION: AN APPROACH TO LANGUAGE TEACHING**

### **The use of Translation in second language acquisition**

As previously mentioned, the aim of this paper is to shed light on the pedagogical level of translation, and how the latter can contribute to teaching and fostering language acquisition whether by the traditional tools of language teaching such as textbooks and handouts, or by technological means.

Translation in this sense is one means to teach a language. The instructor gives exercises involving L1 and L2 in the following areas of Linguistics:

1. Syntax
2. Morphology
3. Vocabulary
4. Figures of Speech

Previous experiments have proven that the degree of proficiency of the learner plays a role in terms of L1 interference (Prince, 1996). Evidence provided by Kroll and Curley (1988) suggests that in the initial stages of learning, new words are strongly linked to their L1 equivalents and shift occurs after about 30 months of study. Although the work of Prince, Kroll and Curley are mostly concerned with vocabulary acquisition, it seems that the patterns of acquisition are also applicable to other linguistic aspects such as syntax, morphology and figures of speech. Another point which is relevant to the present study is that the “shift” to thinking and writing in L2 does not occur automatically over a certain period of time but needs hard work and drilling in L1 vs. L2 translations.

In these experiments, the instructor provided statements in L1 and asked the students to translate them into the L2 and vice-versa. The benefits of this two-way translation process will be elucidated on the following pages.

### **1. Syntax**

#### **The use of auxiliary verbs in English**

The auxiliary verbs **To have**/**To be** do not appear in the present tense in Arabic and sometimes are used differently in the second language.

Students having Arabic as L1 tend to omit the use of these auxiliary verbs while learning English (L2). For phrases such as:

- "I am 10 years old," learners tend to say: "I have 10 years old" or "I 10 years" (This is due to L1 interference).
- "My name is John," they tend to say: "my name John."
- "She is beautiful" is replaced with: "she beautiful."
- Students from the IEP (Intensive English Program) were tested on this method over one semester. 40 students (level 2) who were preparing for the TOEFL exam to be admitted in their major were divided equally into 2 groups. The first 20 students were taught the use of "to have" and "to be" in context. Students were tested on a weekly basis. By the end of the semester errors incurring from the use of the auxiliaries in L2 were reduced by 50% in this group, whereas the other group also consisting of 20 students who were given continuous exercises on auxiliaries through translation (from L1 into L2 and vice versa), improved with a reduction of errors by 80%.

Examples of translation exercises:

- I am 10- years- old
- سني عشر سنوات
  
- -I am in grade 5
- أنا في الصف الخامس
  
- The girl is beautiful
- الفتاة جميلة
  
- The beautiful girl
- الفتاة الجميلة
  
- الأشجار خضراء
- The trees are green
  
- الأشجار الخضراء
- The green trees

Constant repetition of this type of exercise where the student is required to translate phrases such as those above into L1 and L2 resulted in identifying and storing the differences of usage of auxiliary verbs in both languages and respective grammatical rules (L1 vs. L2) in the learners' memories.

## 2. Morphology

In the use of **verb tense** in general, the same kind of exercises can also be applied.

The present perfect and the present progressive, for example, are absent in the Arabic language. They are referred to as the past and the present respectively. Contrastive exercises in both languages would make the distinction clear to the student as the following examples:

- John is eating beans with rice
- يأكل جون الفاصولياء والرز
  
- John eats beans with rice at lunch
- يأكل جون الفاصولياء والرز على الغداء
  
- John has eaten beans with rice before
- أكل جون الفاصولياء والرز من قبل
  
- John ate beans with rice at lunch
- أكل جون الفاصولياء والرز على الغداء

Experiments revealed very interesting results as to the use of translation in mastering L2 verb tenses. The same groups of students from the IEP were tested over one semester (16 weeks). Both groups (context vs. translation) had almost the same rate of morphological errors at the sentence-level by the end of the semester. However, when the same groups were asked to write a composition later at higher levels of the program, those who were never exposed to contrastive exercises (L1 and L2) had more of a tendency to mix up verb tenses in L2 than the others who had used L1 in the past. Gekoski (1980) has pointed out this phenomenon by stating that at lower levels of L2 proficiency, learners use L1 mediation in order to translate their "thoughts" into the L2. Prince (1996), on the other hand, stated that

L2 words are more effectively stored in memory when they are linked to their L1 equivalents. It seems that grammar and particularly morphology is no exception. Learners who are exposed to translation exercises involving verb tenses at an early stage of the learning process are more likely to retain the correct form of their use in L2 than those who are limited to verb tense exercises in L2 context.

### 3. Vocabulary

Today, as most texts place greater emphasis on vocabulary learning than was done in the past (Knight, 1994), it is worthwhile to examine the effectiveness of the various methods in reaching this goal. Opinions are split between retention of word meanings inferred from context (Krashen, 1987) and sentence-level translations (Grace, 1998). From my observation, there was one factor that was tested and proved that translation is effective when used in vocabulary acquisition, and that was the **time factor**. Indeed, I have reached this conclusion through practice without having to select volunteers for the experiment. In my Advanced Academic Writing course, students are required to prepare a research paper by the end of the semester along with a 10 minute brief oral presentation on their research topic. In an oral presentation delivered by a student who is a native speaker of Arabic on the topic of 'Dowry in India', the student took 6 minutes to define 'dowry' in the English Language. This is how she attempted to define it in the L2:

#### **Dowry: Definition**

The term dowry is defined as the payment in cash or/and kind by the bride's family to the bridegroom's family with the giving away of the bride (Kanydhan) in **(an)** Indian marriage:

- Marriage is considered to be a sacred religious affair
- Dowry is a gift given to the groom by the bride's parents
- It symbolizes the recognition of groom and his family

Upon the end of the 6 minutes, a brave student raised his hand to ask "what exactly is "dowry" in Arabic?" The presenter replied المهر. I could see at that moment the students' satisfaction in identifying the precise meaning of the word. The word dowry itself is a controversial term as its practice differs from one country to another. In Islamic

countries, it is the amount of money, jewels, etcetera, granted by the groom to the bride upon marriage, whereas in India it is the female that provides it to the groom. The goal behind this act is not the same in these countries. In order to further my observation, I asked the same student to deliver her oral presentation to the other section of the course (a different group of students who were taking the same course). This time I have asked her to translate into L1 any abstract or unclear terms whenever they occur in the presentation without taking the time to define them in L2. The result was that she finished her presentation within 7 minutes, having more time for debate and discussion of the topic in L2. The student would rather provide the translation of the “unknown” words and terms in L1 to her peers and spend the remaining of her time in discussing Dowry issue in L2.

We can conclude that in the vocabulary learning process, instead of using various contexts, definitions in L2 and sometimes visual aids, the instructor can utilize translation as a way of teaching the words especially in conveying the meaning of **abstract** and **unclear concepts** like: happiness, sadness, success, failure, health, luck, depression, etcetera. Providing the equivalent words in L1 is proven to be less time consuming to both the instructor and student as far as comprehension is concerned. As to quantity and recall process of word acquisition, previous experiments (Prince, 1996 and Grace, 1998) have proven word learning through translation to be superior to word inference from L2 contexts.

#### 4. Figures of Speech

Figures of speech or imagery in language can be represented with specific expressions such as idioms, proverbs and collocations or with metaphor, game words, metonymy, etcetera. The acquisition of these figures of speech in L2 is part of the language learning process. Their teaching is related to their use in context and the reality to which they refer. Inferring the meaning of a figure of speech in a certain text remains a complicated task, especially for beginners. The methodology proposed here in using L1 for multiple figures of speech learning applies to all kinds of figures of speech, including metaphors and idioms. I will cite some examples of these expressions with their respective treatment in the L2 learning process.



### **Idioms**

An idiom is a group of words which, as a whole, has a different meaning from the meaning of the individual words it contains. Hence, the meaning of the idiomatic expression is not the sum total of the words taken individually. Accordingly, an idiom is learned and used as a single unit of language; it should not be analyzed into its constituent elements. Idioms are sometimes referred to as 'fixed expressions' because in many cases the users should not make linguistic changes such as adding or dropping words, replacing a word with another, or changing the order of words (Mahmoud, 2002a).

The acquisition of specific expressions and collocations in L2 such as idioms is sometimes more effective and faster if done through translation. The instructor comes across idioms and proverbs in L2 contained in textbooks or taken from daily lives to explain a certain statement or concept. Not all idioms and proverbs are easy to explain or decode. Some hold cultural connotations that are slightly or completely unknown to the student. Therefore, recurrence to translation in L1 can be of great use to have an accurate and precise understanding of the meanings of those idioms.

According to Mahmoud (2002b), very few studies touch on idioms in passing as a part of a review of the difficulties that Arab students face when learning English as a second language. This scarcity of studies on the transfer of idioms could be attributed to the fact that students cannot understand and use idioms unless they attain a fairly advanced level of proficiency in the second language.

The following examples are an attempt to classify idioms the way they can be perceived by the L2 learners compared to their L1 equivalents with a scrutiny of how translation can play a positive role in the acquisition of L2 idioms and proverbs.

- 1) Idioms in L1 and L2 pertain to the same semantic field with the same word form

Example: A white lie  
The black list

كذبة بيضاء  
اللائحة السوداء

Recurrence to translation in this case is no doubt very helpful to L2 learners as they would understand immediately the meaning of the idiom and retain the order of words when the instructor points out that they are identical to the L1 form.

2) Idioms in L1 and L2 do not pertain to the same semantic field

Example: Like father, like son

هذا الشبل من ذاك الأسد

The equivalence of the above idiom in Arabic for example derives from a different semantic field; which makes it a difficult task for the instructor to explain it in L2 context. However, the same idiom is quite popular in L1, which would facilitate the comprehension process if translated into the student's first language. Besides the comprehension process lies another difficulty for L2 learners, which is the learning of the exact words of the idiom in L2 without making any alteration to the syntax, the punctuation or the order of the words themselves. This is the reason why Mahmoud (2002) stated that idioms start to attract L2 learners at an advanced level of proficiency.

3) Idioms in L1 and L2 are not semantically identical but the meaning of the idiom in L2 is transparent

Example: One man's pain is another man's gain

مصائب قوم عند قوم فوائد

Even in this case, the instructor is advised to revert to translation as the idiom equivalent is well-known in L1 and can ease the L2 idiom comprehension and acquisition though the latter is transparent which means that the words reveal the meaning of the idiom. Indeed, Sautermeister (1989) describes well the behavior of nonspecialist learners of English who are presented with new words in context but who are not satisfied until they have found an L1 equivalent to assist their learning. The author states that this behavior applies to both advanced and beginners. I recall here the case of students in one of my 200 level advanced writing classes who, after having successfully written essays on explanatory and argument syntheses in English, have come to my office to ask "professor what is "synthesis" **exactly** in Arabic?"

4. Idioms in L1 and L2 pertain to the same semantic field but the word form is not the same

Example: Birds of a feather flock together

الطيور على أشكالها تقع

The translation of the idiom into L1 is a matter of choice if the instructor wishes the student to understand the vocabulary word for word.

5. Idioms in L2 do not have equivalents in L1

Example : To kick the bucket

When the idiom does not have an equivalent in L1, the instructor has no choice but to refer to the context in L2 (Raddawi, 1995). If the meaning of the idiom is difficult to infer or vague, then the instructor might refer to several similar L2 contexts.

### **Metaphors**

The same five categories set for idioms can equally be applied to metaphors in L2 acquisition.

Example: A 360 degree solution

In Arabic (L1) “a 360 degree solution” has no meaning. Therefore, the word for word inference of the metaphor is likely to mislead the learners. Instead of the instructor wasting his/her time in explaining the figure of speech in L2 context, which might require time, effort and a rich vocabulary on the part of the student, the instructor can simply translate it in L1 stemming from different semantic field as:

حلّ كامل / حلّ جنري

Further research is encouraged in this regard to have experimental support with statistics and comparative figures as to the effectiveness of L1 in L2 idiom and fixed expression learning.

## **TRANSLATION PROCESS**

### **Beginners**

Since the process for a beginner will certainly be different from that of a professional translator, how does a beginner in language learning use translation?

In this case the student will use word for word translation in order to decode the message in L2. The translation process can occur either from L1 into L2 or vice versa, depending on the goal of the exercise. For example, if the aim is to comprehend a passage written in L2 and answer questions, the instructor provides the text in L2 and the translation process is observed as follows:

1. The students read the statements in the passage in L2
2. Translate them word for word into L1
3. Think and compare to find out and understand the meaning of the statements in L2
4. Work on the statements in L2 and use them for different purposes (comprehension/application of grammatical rules/understanding cultural entities such as idioms and collocations)

The procedure of translating at this level can be summarized as follows:

- Translate
- Understand
- Learn (Raddawi, 1999)

To conclude, **pedagogical translation** or the use of translation in L2 learning starts with the process of translating in order to understand and subsequently learn, whereas professional translation requires that the translator first understands then translate and communicate.

### Advanced

Although experiments have shown that “advanced learners would make more efficient use of context than weaker learners, both during the study phase and during recall” (Prince, 1996), translation still remains a useful solution for advanced levels of language acquisition. The instructor in this case elaborates exercises that suit the students’ level in L2. Thus he/she is likely to bring up further complex units that might hinder the learning process in L2. Whether these obstacles stem from L1 interferences or from lack of understanding of the proper structure of L2, the instructor may use translation to boost the second language acquisition. This will be examined in the following paragraphs.

### **PEDAGOGICAL TRANSLATION FOR ADVANCED LEARNERS: TECHNOLOGICAL AIDS**

The use of technology in L2 acquisition through pedagogical translation is of great help. We (a team that includes a linguist, 2 medical doctors and a translator) have prepared and tested software which utilizes translation in the learning of a foreign language. Fellow doctors were our

target students. Their objective was to specialize in L2. Medical doctors are trained in L2 through the electronic translation of medical statements in L1. At this stage of the learning process, the student (doctor) is interested in the acquisition of medical terminology and phraseological collocations in the second language, in order to communicate with the patients and peer healthcare providers.

The most challenging aspect of the process is developing the dialogue statements in Arabic and English (L1 and L2) and ensuring that the appropriate information is covered. The second challenge is ensuring that the same dialogue exchange using the translations is accurate and meaningful.

It is expected to work in the following manner:

The user (student or instructor in our case) clicks on the required medical statement in either L1 or L2. When this is done, an audio file of the translation of the same statement is simultaneously displayed. The communication device goes to its database of questions and selects the audio file of the Arabic equivalent to the English question or vice-versa.

The learner can view the required statement and listen to its translation. The continuous and repetitive exercise both from L1 into L2 and L2 into L1, will lead to a relatively good acquisition of the medical terminology and expressions in L2, which is the primary objective of the creation of this software. Though the development of this software is ongoing, many medical students have expressed their satisfaction of the learning results. Statistics of outcomes and further testing results of the software will be published in future research papers.

In the future, we hope to develop the product so that a student need merely speak into a microphone, and through voice recognition the computer will both recognize the words and be able to play back a translation. This process would create a phrase bank of questions, able to be accessed in a dynamic fashion, and would also allow for peer review of the translations and an accuracy level unattainable by machine translation or even live interpretation.

However, at this point in time, the accuracy is unacceptable for a health care environment or for an L2 learning process. Voice recognition of the Arabic language is possible at this time, but has not been sufficiently funded for this type of development. It needs collective investors such as academic institutions and governmental establishments.

Other case studies could be envisaged in the use of software for general language skills and communication. The use of software which assists the translation process in the learning of a language seems to be a promising and effective method of second language acquisition.

### TEACHING IMPLICATIONS

This paper sheds light on the pedagogical function of translation, and how translation can contribute to teaching or fostering language acquisition. With increasing emphasis on vocabulary learning in L2 acquisition (Vermeer, 1992) and the importance of translation (L1) (Prince, 1996, Grace, 1998 et al.) in effective and fast quantity vocabulary acquisition, the role of pedagogical translation should be further emphasized in L2 teaching institutions and classrooms. More experimental support is needed through tests and surveys among selected groups of students. Statistics so far obtained in this regard have proven the high level of success of this approach. This is not to exclude the communicative approach or context learning in L2, especially as not all instructors of L2 have a mastery of L1 or are capable of working in a team with L1 and L2 specialists. Fear of L1 dominating L2 learning in or outside the classroom is not justified, as instructors should carefully monitor the use of L1 so that it is used towards specific teaching goals. The translation process should be encouraged especially for students with a low proficiency level in L2. However, translation is not to be confined merely to beginners in L2 and exclusively in vocabulary acquisition sessions but should also extend to advanced learners, especially for more specialized contexts and richer language learning, as in the case of idiom use. According to Mahmoud, the scarcity of studies in this area (learning idiomatic expressions) is justified since second-language students usually express themselves in non-idiomatic language, hence are not expected to use idioms unless they attain a native-like command of the language. Such a high level of proficiency is unlikely to be attained by most students even after university education in contexts where exposure to L2 learning is confined to classroom instruction (2002a). Rich language acquisition is recommended even for students with a low proficiency level in L2, especially since students with Arabic as L1 have a tendency to use idiomatic expressions. Other factors that might contribute to the non-use of idioms by L2 students are: the instructors' avoidance of idioms in their attempt to facilitate comprehension; or the fact that in some specialized language teaching areas, students' exposure to scientific texts, in which

idioms are rarely encountered, is higher. The pedagogical implication here is that L2 learners use idioms frequently in their first language and therefore are aware that idiomatic usage is a sign of proficiency in a language. Thus, the use of L2 for general purposes teaching, should emphasize the acquisition of these idiomatic expressions even in the early stages of the learning process besides plain language fluency and accuracy in general language proficiency.

## CONCLUSION

Today translation is considered as an autonomous multidimensional task. The concepts, statements and experiments developed in this paper lead us to the conclusion that translation is no more a bridge between individuals and civilizations merely for the sake of communication but also a means of teaching a second language. In this sense, translation cannot but play a central role in efficiently and effectively teaching L2. This approach is not merely confined to vocabulary learning but extends to figures of speech and correct syntactical unit acquisition. Translation can be described as a goal, and a pedagogical means in and of itself.

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