Chapter 8
The Role of Translation in Language Teaching:
Back to GT in ELT?

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ABSTRACT

With the development of approaches and methods in Modern Language teaching that favoured oral communication skills and advocated more "natural" methods of second/foreign language acquisition, methodology calling for translation in the classroom was shunned. Nonetheless, translation used as a resource designed to assist the student in improving his or her knowledge of the foreign language through reading comprehension exercises, contrastive analysis, and reflection on written texts continues to be practiced. By examining student performance in problem-solving tasks at the Autonomous University of Zacatecas, this chapter aims to demonstrate the validity of "pedagogical translation" in ELT in Mexico, particularly at undergraduate level where it is an integral part of English reading courses in Humanities study programmes, not as an end in itself, but as a means to perfecting reading skills in a foreign language and furthermore as an aid for consolidating writing and communication skills in the student's first language.

INTRODUCTION

Classical language teaching in Europe placed translation centre-stage in the teaching/learning process. With the development of approaches and methods in Modern Language teaching in Europe and beyond, which beginning in the 19th Century favoured oral communication skills and advocated more "natural" methods of second/ foreign language acquisition, methodology calling for translation in the classroom was shunned. Nonetheless, translation used as a resource designed to assist the student in improving his or her knowledge of the foreign language through reading comprehension exercises, contrastive analysis and reflection on written texts continues to be practiced. This continued practice has led to translation gradually regaining ground in lan-

guage teaching, a development also in part due to the emergence and consolidation of Translation Studies in recent decades, together with changing ideas in Applied Linguistics.

Innovation in other disciplines contributes to our understanding of translation and affects our teaching practice. Behavioural and electro-physiological data have demonstrated that native-language activation is an unconscious correlate of second-language comprehension and, therefore, that translation is an unconscious and inevitable element in foreign-language comprehension (Thierry & Wu, 2007). If this is the case, it is clear, then, that translation has never completely left the language classroom and in spite of the accusations of artificiality brought against the use of translation in language teaching, there have been important calls in recent years for its "reha-bilitation" (Cook, 2010). Additionally, critics of dogmatic communicative approaches question the "naturalness" of classroom practices in general in language acquisition (Pintado Gutiérrez, 2012), thus undermining the case against translation, and there is evidence that translation has begun to be fostered again more explicitly, as a key aspect in communicative competence.

Translation as a language-learning activity in the foreign language classroom has been given many names since the days of medieval Scho-lasticism and the much vilified 19th Century Prussian Grammar-Translation methodologies, from general names such as "school transla-tion", "pedagogical translation" and "academic translation" to more recent terms in the current post-communicative, cognitive paradigm such as "act of translating" (Machida, 2011). Trans-lation in English Language Teaching (ELT) is updated constantly through the incorporation of new technology, from paper-based and electronic handheld resources and specialized software to online platforms and virtual forums, all of which can be used to facilitate the "act of translating" in the teaching/ learning process. With the use of 21st Century technology, "old-fashioned" methods can be adapted so that students can prepare to read both ancient and contemporary texts.

By examining student performance in problem-solving tasks at the Autonomous University of Zacatecas, using process research methods and drawing on developmental learning theory (cf Dam-Jensen & Heine, 2009), this chapter aims to demonstrate the validity and relevance of "pedagogical translation" in ELT in Mexico, particularly at undergraduate level where it is an integral part of English reading courses in many Humanities study programmes. In the Literature and Linguistics department in Zacatecas, transla-tion is not explicitly taught as an end in itself, but rather as a means to perfecting reading skills in a foreign language. It is, furthermore, conceived as an aid for consolidating writing and com-munication skills in the student's first language and, therefore, as an important component in the undergraduate programme.

BACKGROUND

"Pedagogical translation" as used in this chapter refers to the use of translation in the classroom, to translation as a language learning activity, an exercise in which translations are not necessarily produced in a final, written form to be handed in, judged and graded, but rather carried out as a read-ing comprehension exercise, sometimes as a group activity. The various terms applied by linguists and educators to the use and practice of translation in the classroom have since the mid-20th century tended to be employed in opposition to "real" translation and are most often associated with the much vilified "unreal" Grammar-Translation (GT) methodology. Howatt and Widdowson find "grammar-translation" to be a misleading label, one that was coined by the method's detractors in order to draw attention to the features they most disliked, but not one that reflects the intentions of

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