

Evaluations of Translation as a Teaching Resource

— Claims and Counterclaims* —

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0 Introduction

The educational pendulum has swung back and forth throughout the twenty-five centuries of language teaching. Four language skills--speaking, listening, reading, and writing--have received varying degrees of consideration depending upon where the pendulum happened to point at a given period of time. In theory, it is listening and speaking that have been currently recognized as a main area of active interest (Dulay, Burt, and Krashen 1982; Terrell 1982; Gibbons 1985). The other two skills seem to be placed in the backdrop of today's educational scene in general. Too, English teachers here in Japan (especially those at a junior high school level) seem more preoccupied with instillation of oral/aural communicative ability in the learner while paying only a lip service to reading and writing activities. This holds particularly true with writing whose principal approach^{1***} has been long identified with translation in this country. To many the fact remains a sorry state of affairs, for translation has been regarded not as a trustful teaching resource but rather as an undesirable appendage to the second language education whose prevalence in Japan can only be relegated to the lack of better approaches to teaching writing. The misgivings many feel toward translation are not unfounded: there are evidences, observational and theoretical, against this particular approach. And yet, the endurance and prevalence, if nothing else, of this approach compels us to reconsider its latent profits it might bear when viewed in a proper perspective and applied in a likewise proper frame. The essential impetus for a successful second language learning derives from, in my view, an integrated coordination of four aspects of language activity in a more balanced manner.

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I Claims

Translation, as it is known in this country, is equipped with twin purposes of grammar teaching and grammar testing. Practically no examination of English is without a familiar question or two: Translate the following Japanese sentence into English. This question addresses not so much the examinee's creative ability to express himself² in the target language as his memory capacity with regard to English vocabulary and its grammatical construction. Accordingly, a textbook which supposedly teaches the learner how to translate Japanese into English asks, in effect, to memorize as many model sentences as possible. The model sentences are accompanied with their Japanese equivalents respectively, and they found their way into the textbook owing to their presumed usefulness as a cue for the learner to recall the target sentence. Strictly speaking, therefore, the learner does not even 'translate' a Japanese sentence into English; rather, all he is trained to do through this approach is to come up with an appropriate response which has been stowed away upon being given a particular stimulus—a cue in his own vernacular.

The basic format of a textbook that claims to teach writing through the approach outlined above remains virtually unchanged. Whether such textbooks were written thirty years ago or just three months ago, 'composition' textbooks available surprisingly resemble to each other in their basic makeup. Below is a sketchy description of one of those books.

A textbook called *A Table of English Composition*, which was published in 1956, insists on the importance of ample exercises in grammar and rigorous memorization of model sentences in improving the learner's writing skill. 'Ample exercises' include grammar reviews with, for instance, transformational type of exercises. ("Change the following sentences into a passive form.") The first fifty pages of this textbook are devoted to improving the learner's grammatical knowledge, which is considered the first and hardest obstacle in the way toward a more advanced writing level. With plenty exercises on each grammatical item coupled with detailed explanation on it, the authors of this textbook insist, the learner will be able to increase his writing ability eventually. The latter half of the textbook will theoretically enable the learner to become a 'model-sentence bank' of a sort. The learner is asked to learn by heart almost all of the sentences which appear in the section that contain important syntactic and/or idiomatic expressions instrumental in getting a good score in the examination. Each sentence to be memorized is short enough to encourage memorization on the learner's side; each chapter in this section is organized according to grammar units or universal sets ("weather," "health," "hobby," and the like) in order to facilitate and help maintain memorized information. And still there are close to one thousand sentences to be crammed with—quite a feast even for the most gifted learner.

Obviously, arguments against such a memorization-oriented approach are easy to find. What follows is the list of criticisms against translation from several standpoints.

As is pointed out above, the model sentences are chosen on the basis of their degrees of

usefulness for the learner. If certain type of sentence is observed to appear more recurrently than another in text or exercise books or in examination questions, the sentence is sure to be scooped up to make an entry in a composition textbook. In this regard, usefulness may be equivalent with frequency: the sentences are selected and listed in the composition textbook on the same ground as that of word selection for any word-frequency list. For one thing, it is through this analogy that a criticism against translation is elicited.

Each Japanese sentence in most composition textbooks is accompanied with one corresponding English sentence in the same manner as a word-frequency list in which one meaning and one meaning alone is assigned to each word. The strict one-to-one correspondence across the two languages is subject to criticism that is similar in nature to the one Twaddell raises with regard to the word-meaning relationship in a word-frequency list. Twaddell (1973) cited major weaknesses of a word-frequency list by citing (1) polysemy, (2) preposition, and (3) register. The weaknesses are shared by a composition textbook based on the translation approach. First, strict one-to-one correspondence tends to reduce the optimal flexibility which a sentence could otherwise have. An idea or a concept can be usually expressed in many different forms without causing the original thought any disturbing change. As for vocabulary learning, Twaddell goes as far as to claim that memorizing matched pairs of words in two languages is an educational atrocity. Likewise, too much emphasis on memorizing matched pairs of sentences across different languages would deprive a language of its innate flexibility in the meaning-form relationship, thus preventing a learner from becoming creative in the target language.

Secondly, multiple meaningness of a preposition cannot adequately be represented in the one-to-one correspondence system of a word-frequency list. Neither can the memorization-oriented approach of translation. In the composition textbook depicted above, prepositions are dealt with in Part Four. Although each preposition is used in two or, at best, three different sentences, reflecting respective meanings, other possible meanings of each preposition is cut out for the sake of simplicity, which is indispensable to memorization of model sentences. Owing to this oversimplification, the textbook fails to provide adequate information on preposition usage.

Thirdly, just as a word-frequency list proves insufficient when it comes to a question of actual usage in different types of discipline, so can the paired sentences in this textbook offer little help when the learner faces a matter of register. In other words, the textbook lacks a meaningful context whereby the learner could choose appropriate sentences.

Total lack of a meaningful environment implies more than a matter of proper sentence choice. Stern defines a good language learner as the one who "attend to the four areas of competence [from, meaning, communication, creativity] simultaneously from the beginning [of learning]" (Stern 1975 : 309). In contrast, the translation exercises found in this textbook provide no opportunity at all for the learner to apply his knowledge in a communicative context, which will most likely keep the learner from becoming a good language user.

As is suggested by the definition of a good language learner above, there is a fusion of form

and meaning when he successfully uses the target language. That is to say, a good language learner seems to take the form for granted and thus can focus on message--meaning. This ability to use the target language with maximum attention on meaning while paying minimum attention to form is said to be hard to come by in the translation type of exercises, for the learner has Japanese sentences constantly in his view, which forces him to concentrate on the form of a sentence. Keeping a Japanese sentence to be translated within the learner's constant view tends to bring about some damaging effects on his performance. For example, Robert Lado (1978) found in his experiment on translation that translation which proceeds from surface structures (that is, with the original sentence in one's view) causes greater negative influence from a native language than delayed translation (that is, without the original sentence in one's view) does.

The negative influence--sometimes called interference as opposed to transfer--from the learner's native tongue that Lado observed in the surface-to-surface translation consists of three categories. The first category is the carryover of syntax or vocabulary of the learner's native language (Spanish, in this instance). This type of negative influence is likely to result in demonstrably non-English sentences. The second category includes long, run-on sentences, although they otherwise show acceptable English grammatical patterns. The last category has those sentences that somehow seem awkward in construction.

Lado's findings correlate with some of the characteristic errors the Japanese learner reveals in his writings. At the beginning level, the Japanese learner often shows errors of the first two categories: obvious ungrammaticality and/or evidence of negative influence from the Japanese language. At more advanced levels, the problem in writing in English is not so much ungrammaticality as unnaturalness or stiltedness. Conversely, Lado's experiment shows us what a translation method with a Japanese sentence in one's view cannot achieve. The composition textbook above assumes that a palpable difference between a low level of proficiency and that of higher proficiency lies in the length of a sentence to be translated. Lado's conclusion, however, contradicts with such a view. No matter how 'advanced' the learner may be considered in the translation technique described so far, it would be unlikely that he can create an English sentence natural enough to be genuinely communicative.

Finally, from an educational standpoint comes another nudge against translation to the effect that the translation type of exercises with their content already provided tends to deprive the learner of the necessary opportunity to conceive and put forward an original thought for himself (Hatori 1982 : 31-33). This, in Hatori's eye, is an educational fallacy the teacher must carefully circumvent: exclusive translation exercises may produce a learner who is good at manipulating the form of a language but who is alarmingly poor at forming and expressing his own thought or emotional reaction in the target language.

II Counterclaims

As has been outlined so far, translation is not necessarily looked upon with favor. Judging

from the pointed remarks on its negative aspect, we can assume the status translation is given to be very low in today's language education community in general: it is an educational outcast at best. There are, however, some who do stand by this notorious approach. Among them is Isaac Morris (1956), who placed the skills involved in translation above all other linguistic activities. According to him, to be able to translate a message from one language into another (and vice versa) presupposes not only a sophisticated command on syntax and vocabulary of the respective languages but also a wide range of background knowledge of the target language and its culture. Accordingly, he considers the ultimate goal of foreign language learning to be the ability to translate (Okuda 1985 : 92). Another noted guardian of this approach is Watanabe of Sophia University. In his famous controversy over Japan's English education with Hiraizumi, a member of House of Councilors, (1975) he persuasively argues for the traditional method of language learning and teaching. Translation, along with other conventional disciplines in foreign language learning, does promote the learner's intellectual as well as linguistic development, according to him.

In order to understand these contrasting views on the same subject, we need quickly go over the course in history which translation has followed to date.

Translation as a teaching resource has come a long way--probably much longer than we usually think it is. Indeed, we can trace it as far as to the Roman period. As Kelly (1969) has shown in his book, translation was developed as a scholarly exercise during the third and second centuries B. C. by the first Roman poets. During the Renaissance period in which stylistic nicety was of utmost importance, translation reached its height.

One property which was always attributed to translation throughout its long history is that it was an exercise taken as being appropriate for advanced learners. The Romans reserved the exercise for the mature scholar; so did more contemporary Sweet and Jespersen. Although these names are always associated with the Direct Method (in which the use of the learner's native tongue is usually forbidden, resulting in a near-total exclusion of translation from teaching resource), even they admit that translation definitely has its use in the advanced stage of learning (Kelly *ibid.* : 176). By Kelly's account, in fact, the history of language teaching was "dominated by translation, which, at certain times, has even driven reading and composition" (p. 171) from the particular field.

Seen in this light, translation seems more promising as a teaching tool of a living language than has been suggested by equally relentless appraisals from theoretical, psycholinguistical, and educational viewpoints mentioned in the foregoing section. What is now interesting is the question as to why such a formerly influential method in teaching a foreign language has come to be held in contempt as being ineffectual in almost all regards. In order to understand the pivotal issue here, we have to examine what happened to this approach in the nineteenth century German.

While translation remained as a respectable method to impart in the learner the ability to creatively manipulate a living language (Latin was a living language up until the Middle Ages), the method persisted even after the language had slipped out of use and placed itself among the

dead languages. Unfortunately for translation, the approach was not unsuited to dissect and analyze the dead language as well, so much so that it became intrinsically associated with the dead, not living, language. It was not until Karl Plöts had fished out the approach from the stockroom for the dead languages during the nineteenth century in German that it was again made use of to teach several living languages such as German, French, and English (Okuda *ibid.* : 89). This was, however, not a happy revival for translation: on the contrary, what Plöts resurrected was its frame, not its spirit. The textbook Plöts published consisted of grammatical rules and their exceptions coupled with rather meaningless, senseless sentences whose immediate objective was to confirm and consolidate the learner's solid grasp of a grammatical rule in question--a prototype of today's composition textbooks based on translation. The meaning to be shared and appreciated was left out completely from what he wrote. His textbooks are said to have become enormously popular throughout Europe at that time, and the approach behind became known as Traditional Method or Grammar-Translation Method (GTM).

As we can see even from the scant description of the course in history which translation has followed, it is translation viewed as a characteristic property of GTM that has been repeatedly criticized as unfit for foreign language teaching today. Much dispute over the potentials of translation as a language teaching resource turns out, in actuality, the one over GTM, or more precisely, over translation misrepresented by GTM. Below is an outline of GTM, with its basic defining features :

1. Classes are taught in the mother tongue with little active use of the target language.
2. Much vocabulary is taught in the form of bits of isolated words.
3. Long elaborate explanation of the intricacies of grammar are given.
4. Grammar provides the rule for putting words together, and instruction often focuses on the form and inflection of words.
5. Reading of classical text is begun early.
6. Little attention is paid to the content of texts, which are treated as exercises in grammatical analysis.
7. Often the only drills are exercises in translating disconnected sentences from the target language into the mother tongue.
8. Little or no attention is given to pronunciation.

(Celce-Murcia & McIntosh 1979 : 3)

Caught up in the frame of GTM above, translation became an approach heavily biased toward grammar. In Kelly's words, the emphasis, which had once been on ideas and grace of expression, was now on structure and linguistic equivalence (*ibid.* : 176). In this way, GTM helped deprive translation of its inherent property--a constructive, creative control over the language--which the ancient Romans and their descendants had for so long known and cherished. The entanglement of translation with GTM eventually lead to its tarnished reputation some of whose

manifestation are evident in the evaluations of this approach by Twaddell, Lado, and Hatori respectively.

On top of this, writing in general received only a subordinate position in the foreign language education hierarchy when newer approaches were developed in an attempt to replace GTM toward the end of the nineteenth century. In Japan in particular, Oral Method, which was cultivated and introduced into this country by H. E. Palmer in 1922, first set out to reform the teaching methodology deeply rooted in GTM. After W. W. II, C. C. Fries of Michigan University likewise inaugurated a reform by means of Oral Approach, or Audio-Lingual Approach, with its then popular habit-formation theory and pattern practice (Katayama et al. 1985 : 50-75). What is common between these two newer approaches is their emphasis on the sound aspect of language, undoubtedly reflexing the linguistic as well as psychological theories advanced at that time in the first language milieu (see Brown 1981, for instance). The linguistic theory in particular has it that language is primarily a sound, with the written form occupying a minor place in the dominance configuration. The presumed primacy of speech over writing may be appreciated in the definitions of language found in some dictionaries. Consider, for example, the following definition :

[Language is] the aspect of human behavior that involves the use of *vocal* sounds in meaningful patterns and, *when they exist, corresponding written symbols*³ to form, express, and communicate thoughts and feelings (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* 1969 : 736).

We can infer from the very way in which the italicized portions are sequenced the relative standings of speech and writing: speech primary; writing secondary. Or consider the next example where language is expressly equated with speech :

language: A system of communication by sound, i, e., through the organs of speech and hearing, among human beings of a certain group or community, using vocal symbols possessing arbitrary conventional meaning (Pei & Gaynor *Dictionary of Linguistics* 1969 : 119).

In terms of the process of language acquisition, moreover, it is doubtless that a child learning his first language is exposed to the sound for quite a long period of time before he ever begins to read or write. However, it would be extremely exigent to assume from our experience in the first language acquisition alone that the second language learning should follow the same sequence. While the line between one's first and second language acquisitions may be "so thin that it is practically indistinguishable" (Stern 1983 : ii) in many instances, no scientific evidence available to date suggests that the two processes may overlap neatly without any distinctive turfs of their own (see Brown *ibid.*). To put in a classical skepticism to this effect, the parallelism view is hard pressed to answer just what it is that makes the language acquisition

harder the second time around contrary to our common experience that indicates the exact opposite is true with most other instances. (Think of, for instance, two similar sports such as baseball and softball.) As this casual observation shows, there is no compelling evidence against reposing in the writing activity more trust than has been the case lately, especially when it comes to the second, not first, language learning. Although the sound aspect of language may be predominant during the earlier stage of the individual's life, the fact does not guarantee at all that the second language learning should start with exposing the learner to the sound of the target language, as is indicated by Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (*ibid.*).

With regard to translation, in particular, possible advantages should be more carefully weighed against its proved disadvantages; chiefly, however, the villain is the frame laid down by GTM that bound translation up with mechanical, structure-oriented activities. When divorced from GTM pernicious to its creative virility, translation could again assume an indispensable, if not exclusive, role in the teaching as well as learning a foreign language. We, therefore, carefully tear the gripping hands of GTM off translation in order for the approach to restore its due credit. To achieve this end, the following suggestions should be taken into account:

1. A strict one-to-one correspondence at the level of linguistic form across the languages should be discarded; there are usually more than one possible way to express a given thought or concept.
2. There is no theoretical ground known that encourages the learner to memorize a matched pair of sentences in improving his writing ability. As Miller (1964) pointed out, a memorization-oriented approach is mathematically inadequate in accounting for the characteristic novelty of sentences (Oller 1979 : 22). Also we should realize the human mechanism of forgetting-- "cognitive pruning" (Brown *ibid.* : 74).
3. Prevention of negative influence (interference) from the native tongue should be kept in mind while positive transfer recognized and encouraged. Comparative studies between the two languages are to be more productively employed in the process of translation. This will probably make the learner more sensitive to the intricacies of the languages involved.
4. A sentence to be translated should be accompanied by a meaningful context by which the sentence itself becomes relevant to the learner. A meaningful sentence will help the learner to infer the illocutionary message of a sentence, resulting in a strengthened ability to empathize with others. Thus the learner can be trained to think and react to the cognitive as well as affective aspect of the message through the process of translation.

III Summary

Translation exercises are not a stimulus-response activity in a Skinnerian sense. On the contrary, they may possibly serve as a reliable teaching resource in developing communicative competence in the second language more than current theories biased toward the sound aspect

of language indicate. The possibility does not diminish when we direct our attention to some of the crucial differences between the first and second language learning processes. In addition, a glance at the historical curriculum vitae of translation supports this view: at various phases in history the approach was considered highly competent in teaching as well as learning a living foreign language. It also shows that the 'dustbin' view of translation resulted from an unhappy marriage of this approach with GTM in the nineteenth century Europe. What is necessary, therefore, is to reexamine translation in a different sort of frame. Such a viewpoint will shed a new light on the creative aspect germane to translation. At a practical level, it will turn out to be useful when a 'controlled' composition is too controlled or when a 'free' composition too free. The possible contribution of translation to the development of one's linguistic control is recognized not only by some language teachers but also by some scholars in related fields, with an eminent Russian psychologist Luria, ⁴ for example, among them.

Notes

1. Strictly speaking, 'approach,' 'method,' and 'technique' ought to be distinguished (see Anthony 1963, for example). However, these words are interchangeably used in this presentation. The choice of one over another is a result of purely stylistic consideration.
2. While I accept the principle of 'non-sexist language' in scholarly writing, I have used masculine forms throughout this presentation on the ground that they can be understood as unmarked for sex unless otherwise indicated by the context.
3. Italics provided.
4. Luria (1979 : 277) states that translating a message from one language into another involves more than a change in form; that it is a complicated mental process whose principal advantage bears on the forming of thought and on one's awareness of such an intellectual process.

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