Translation in the Context of EFL - The Fifth Macroskill?

Stuart Campbell
School of Languages & Linguistics
University of Western Sydney

Abstract: EFL teaching methods often ignore the first language altogether and as a consequence ignore the potential of translation in language learning. Four factors that undermine the lack on integration of translation and EFL are 1) a strong anti-translation bias in EFL teaching methodology; 2) lack of recognition of translation in EFL publishing industry; 3) obstacles stemming from the demographics of EFL; 4) lack of interest from translation scholars. This paper argues that there are advantages of incorporating translation into ESL teaching.

Key words: translation, interpreting

Let me begin this paper with an image. Picture two ocean liners cruising about half a kilometer apart. They are traveling parallel, and if they maintain their course they will never collide and never separate. All the crew and passengers on one ship are standing on the starboard side and looking south. On the other ship everyone is standing on the port side and looking north. The two ships, named the SS EFL and the SS Translation, are oblivious to one another. And there we leave them sailing into the sunset with little prospect of either realizing the existence of the other.

As an ex-teacher of ESL and an academic in the area of translation I have long been puzzled that these two applied disciplines are not in closer contact and have not influenced one another more than they have. They draw on ideas from similar bodies of knowledge – linguistics, psychology,

cultural studies and they share the same general aim of enhancing communication across language boundaries. They even have a shared ethical imperative of promoting cross-cultural links. This is not to say that some scholars have not examined the link between language teaching and translation; in researching this presentation I did come across a number of papers on the topic. At least a few of the passengers on the two ships have spotted each other. But it seems to me that the links are still tentative and the discussions somewhat apologetic, as if people are saying, "OK, it's a bit strange to integrate language teaching and translation, but let's give it a try". I have a sense that the passengers on the SS Translation feel that they are betraying their discipline if they get mixed up with language teachers, and that the passengers on the SS EFL are somewhat daunted at having to stray into a new and exotic discipline. In this presentation I will try to explain why the two areas should be better integrated, and why translation should indeed be considered the fifth macroskill.

By the way, I should mention that I am going to use the terms translation fairly loosely to refer to writing and speaking. Where necessary, I will use the term interpreting just to refer to spoken interaction.

TRANSLATION, ENGLISH AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

Bilinguals and natural translation/interpreting

Bilingualism is probably more common than monolingualism worldwide. For most bilinguals, a regular part of the communicative repertoire is to explain something in another language. Logic suggests that this kind of natural translation – translation and interpreting skill learnt without formal study - is a macrofunction practiced by the majority of humanity. Indeed it may be possible to create a taxonomy of natural translation functions, such as *explaining in another language what someone has just said, giving a rough idea in another language of the meaning of a document*, etc. We might delve into even more detail with functions like *tell a joke in another language* and *explain in another language what is on a menu*. Oddly, we rarely if ever see such functions as mainstream items in EFL curriculum material. This seems even more

odd when we consider that every EFL learner is by definition becoming bilingual (or trilingual, etc) and will function in some way as a natural translator.

Perhaps it seems that I am making an unnecessary fuss about this; of course it is obvious that knowing two languages entails some kind of translation. But I think that natural translation is not only an integral part of bilingual behaviour, but is integral to the behaviour of language learners and to the process of language acquisition itself. All modern theories of second language acquisition acknowledge the first language in some way and accommodate its influence, even if we have gone beyond the excesses of the Contrastive Hypothesis. What is extraordinary is that EFL teaching methods often ignore the first language altogether and as a consequence ignore the potential of translation in language learning.

Reasons for the Lack of Integration of Translation and EFL

Why is translation seldom included in mainstream EFL curricula? There seem to be two main reasons, the first methodological and the second concerned with demographics and economics.

It is well known that language teaching methods have undergone regular and radical changes, and that the place of the mother tongue has featured in arguments for and against teaching methods. Kirsten Malmkjaer in her book *Translation and Language Teaching* dates the objections to translation in language teaching back to the nineteenth century. Scholars like Sweet and Jespersen questioned the grammar translation method, basing their argument on the notions that speech is primary, that the use of connected text is advantageous in teaching and learning, and that oral work should have priority in the classroom. New understandings in psychology similarly influenced this movement, with fears that translation would be detrimental to the formation of "associations" in the language being learned. Meanwhile, a host of "Natural Methods" of language learning were being developed, including for example the Berlitz method, which posed various psychological and pedagogical objections to translation. In the Berlitz courses "translation is ruled out under any circumstances". (Malmkjaer 1998 3:4).
Malmkjaer summarises these objections as follows:

Translation:

Is independent of the four skills which define language competence: reading, writing, speaking and listening
Is radically different from the four skills
Takes up valuable time which could be used to teach these four skills
Is unnatural
Misleads students into thinking that expressions in two languages correspond one-to-one
Prevents students from thinking in the foreign language
Produces interference
Is a bad test of language skills
Is only appropriate for training translators
(Malmkjaer 1998:6)

I will not spend time challenging these arguments here, other than to say that they are mostly simplistic, and that there are convincing counter arguments for most of them. What I would like to do is briefly discuss the economic and demographic reasons that I believe have bolstered objections to translation in the EFL field.

It is acknowledged that EFL is an international industry worth billions of dollars, and that a major element of that industry is publishing. At the same time it is the simple fact that the users of published EFL materials are speakers of a great range of languages, and that the viability of the EFL publishing industry would be severely weakened if materials were specially designed for speakers of individual languages. Clearly, a one size fits all policy is good business. It is not good business to publish thirty or forty different versions of a single textbook, each containing for example, explanatory material in the languages of the learners, or even translation materials in those languages. I am not suggesting for a moment that EFL publishers should switch their policy; what I am suggesting is that we should not take the absence of translation in EFL textbooks as an endorsement of the anti-translation position.

The demographics of EFL also strengthen the anti-translation position. Although we can find plenty of situations where learners share a first language and where translation could be practised, multilingual classes are a reality in many circumstances. In Australia for example, it would be very unusual to find an EFL class where all the students spoke

the same first language. Teachers too are part of the picture: Knowledge of the learners' first language is not a normal requirement for EFL teachers although it is a bonus. But of course no teacher can know all the languages represented in a multilingual classroom.

The fault is not all on the EFL side. Translation scholars have a vast range of their own concerns, and EFL comes very low on the list. Translation research is a very fast moving field, which seems to reinvent itself every decade; we do not even have an agreed name for our discipline. Certainly some translation scholars have looked at the issue of translation in language teaching in a general sense (e.g. Dollerup 1993), but another issue lurks behind their reluctance to engage with EFL. This issue is the strongly held belief that translators should not work into a second language, a principle that is expressed in various statutes and declarations (International Federation of Translators, UNESCO). The logical extension of this belief is that to mix translation and EFL is to encourage professional translation into English as a second language, which could weaken the professional status of translators. I tried to point out the inevitability of translation into the second language in my 1998 book, but we still have a long way to go (Campbell 1998).

Let me summarise this section, then, by setting out the four factors that undermine the lack on integration of translation and EFL:

A strong anti-translation bias in EFL teaching methodology;
Lack of recognition of translation in the EFL publishing industry;
Obstacles stemming from the demographics of EFL;
Lack of interest from translation scholars.

Resistance to the Anti-translation Bias

While I have painted a gloomy picture so far, I should say that the anti-translation bias reflects very much the situation at the center of EFL power and influence. To talk about a center of EFL power and influence sounds rather sinister, but what I mean is the view from English speaking countries like Britain, USA and Australia[1]. In fact in many parts of the

[1] Kachru's notion of the concentric circles of English reflects this notion, e.g. Kachru (1985). Phillipson (1992) makes the point much more forcefully in the context of his theory of linguistic imperialism.

world, translation and EFL are very much integrated through necessity[2]. In South East Asia and in Latin America it is quite usual for translation to be incorporated into English syllabuses, especially at university level. The rationale for this is an entirely practical one, and goes back to my claim about EFL learners becoming natural translators, and the idea that there is a range of functions of natural translation. A handy proof of this is the role of the bilingual secretary or personal assistant. In Australia, this job classification is almost unknown because despite all the evidence to the contrary Australian companies still tend to believe that English is sufficient to do business. But in many other parts of the world, bilingual secretaries are a recognized category, and engage in a great range of natural translation functions. For a university student of English aiming to do this kind of work, there is nothing odd about studying translation as part of an English program[3]. Just think of some of the tasks that such an employee in Indonesia might carry out each week:

Reading a letter in English and telling someone what it says in Indonesian
Making a phone enquiry in English on behalf of an Indonesian colleague
Interpreting in a meeting for an Indonesian colleague and an Australian client
Making a written translation in English of a letter drafted in Indonesian
Taking a phone call in English and writing a message in Indonesian
Taking instructions in Javanese, writing a note of them in Indonesian, and calling a contact in Australia to explain the instructions in English.

It would seem very odd indeed if the competence underlying these tasks were not developed in an English program in Indonesia or Argentina or China or Kuwait. It also seems a great pity that the methodological,

[2] See Hung (1995) for a discussion of translation and interpreting in English courses in Chinese-speaking countries; Muskat-Tabakowska (1971) examines the situation in Poland; Stibbard (1994, 1998) argues the cased for the judicious use of translation in language teaching.

[3] See Pisarska (1988) for a measured account of how translation can be incorporated into language teaching for expressly these purposes.

economic and demographic obstacles I have mentioned are an impediment to them being developed in multilingual classes. In fact, I believe that learners with a common language and bilingual teachers have an enormous advantage, and that translation in these situations should be strongly encouraged and not suppressed. I will deal with some of those advantages in the next section of my presentation.

ADVANTAGES OF TRANSLATION IN EFL

Introduction

In this section I will discuss some of the advantages of incorporating translation into ESL teaching[4]. I have picked out four areas where I think translation-based techniques are highly relevant, and in some cases I have provides some counter arguments to the common objections. The four areas roughly correspond to the four levels of linguistic analysis, i.e. vocabulary, grammar, semantics and pragmatics:

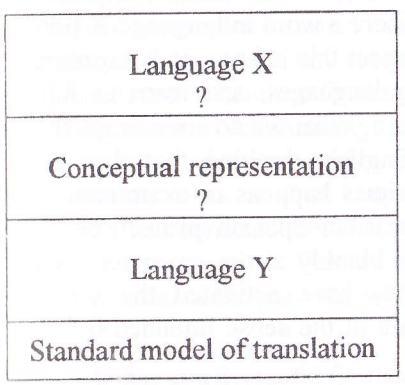
Translation teaching techniques for vocabulary work
Translation and focus-on-form
Translation as a semantic content delivery system
Translation and cross-cultural pragmatics

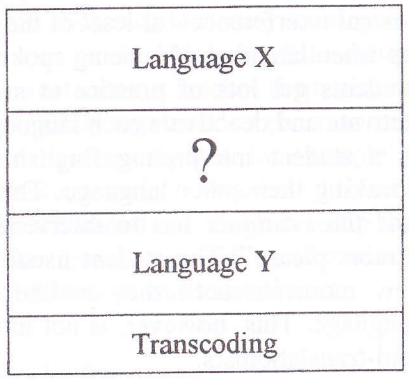
Translation Teaching Techniques for Vocabulary Work

Teachers of professional translation- and especially of oral translation, or interpreting, often teach a technique known as transcoding. The psycholinguistic explanation of transcoding goes something like this: Translation involves firstly converting the source language material into a conceptual representation: language X is turned into ideas. Next the conceptual representation is recoded into the source language: ideas are turned into language Y. We believe that the process can be speeded up by transcoding, that is by eliminating the conceptual stage. This entails using intensive memorization of pairs of source and target language words and phrases. We train students to do this so that can "automatically" translate

[4] Newson (1998) provides some useful strategies for incorporating translation in EFL. Totawar (1997) provides a host of examples across various language pairs. Zohrevandi (1992) similarly suggests useful strategies for translation in EFL.

or interpret as much as possible, and reserve mental processing capacity for the trickier aspects of the task.





Now one of the objections to translation in language teaching is that it "misleads students into thinking that expressions in two languages correspond one-to-one". However, it is misleading to believe that there are no one-to-one correspondences between two languages. You can test this quite easily with a simple word association test: Write a random list of a hundred nouns, verbs and adjectives in English and ask a bilingual person to tell you the first equivalent they can think of for each one; many words will have instantly retrievable equivalents. In translation teaching we find that even idioms and set expressions have one-to-one equivalents: translators and interpreters simply can't afford the time to decode, conceptualise and recode common items like *as soon as possible* and *in the light of*.

If we accept that the issue of one-to-one correspondence is not a serious objection, is there a place for transcoding practice in EFL? I think there is, and I believe that it is supported by research into the way that the bilingual brain stores words. One of the major controversies in this area is whether bilinguals store words in a single memory area or whether they have store the two languages separately. One very convincing theory is that concrete words in two languages tend to be stored together, while abstract words are stored language specifically. If this is true, then it would seem a very efficient method to learn new vocabulary in bilingual pairs when there are one-to-one correspondences – in fact with concrete

rather than abstract words. But what about the risk of interference – one of the main objections to translation-type activities in English teaching? One response to this is that in interpreting classes we encounter very little lexical interference - at least of the kind where a word in language X pops up when language Y is being spoken. I suspect this is because interpreting students get lots of practice at switching languages, and learn to fully activate and deactivate each language in turn. What we do sometimes find is a student interpreting English with English, thinking that they are speaking their other language. This sometimes happens in examinations, and the examiner has to intervene and say "In Spanish please" or "In Arabic please". The student usually looks blankly at the examiner for a few moments until they realize that they have activated the wrong language. This, however, is not interference in the sense intended by the anti-translationists.

Translation and Focus-on-Form

The focus-on form approach in language teaching is, in my view, a welcome return to the consideration of grammatical structure in teaching methodology. Focus-on-form relies on findings from second language acquisition research, especially understandings about the order of the acquisition of grammar. A main principle of focus-on form is that teachers concentrate on structures that build on what learners can already do. I don't want to present a long technical argument here about interlanguage theory and developmental pathways, but I do want to comment on some practical and theoretical problems in dealing with grammar.

Let us say that we are ready to have our students practice passive sentences in English. There are two ways that a student can generate a passive sentence in an orthodox language class. One is to convert an English active sentence into a passive sentence. Another is to produce the passive sentence as a response to some stimulus or other – a picture, a diagram, or some other semantic input.

Now what we know from translation is that most languages have some kind of passive-like construction, where the recipient of an action can occur as a grammatical subject. But we also know that there is seldom a neat correspondence between the English passive and the counterpart in the other language. Arabic, for example, can certainly make a passive with

an agent like *The bus was struck by the car*, but it prefers to use a different construction when the agent is mentioned. In fact research we have done at the University of Western Sydney shows that translating passives involves a complex network of decisions. Now while it may be a good mechanical exercise for students to turn a hundred English active sentences into a hundred English passive sentences, it teaches them almost nothing about which meanings are appropriately expressed as passives and which are not. A translation exercise can show exactly this, for example if we present a set of first language sentences with a range of different grammatical constructions that can all be translated into English using the passive construction. This is in fact the focused use of translation to provide content for practice, which I will discuss in more detail next.

Translation as a Semantic Content Delivery System

EFL teachers spend a good deal of time finding ways to provide semantic content for students to work with. Any practice situation in EFL writing or speaking involves students transforming ideas into English, and each situation requires what we might call a delivery system to get semantic content into the students' heads. The delivery systems in monolingual spoken language teaching are actually very inefficient, and boil down to a very limited set:

Type 1: Ask students to read something in English and talk about it in English

Type 2: Ask students to say something in response to what someone else says

Type 3: Ask students to say something in response to messages in another semiotic system, e.g. pictures.

Type 1 has the disadvantage that the level of the written material must match the level of the students' spoken language. The complexity of semantic content is limited by reading speed, vocabulary size and grammatical skill. I can think of no reason why we should assume that even a beginner level student can only cope with primitive ideas, but that is precisely what we do when we ask a student to respond to something written at their level of reading comprehension.

In Type 2 we can ask students to respond to other students, or to

listening material that is based on fluent speech. Student-student interactions may kick off successfully if we provide enough stimulus material, but we have all seen students struggling in pair work. The use of listening material is also problematic for the same reason as reading material; the complexity of the content is governed by the students' listening comprehension level.

Type 3 has the advantage that well presented graphic material can trigger the imagination and begin a flow of semantic content. However, some things are very difficult to show in pictures or may be open to multiple interpretations. Good graphic materials are also hard for teachers to produce.

I was an ESL teacher for long enough to know that these are more than just semantic content delivery methods; they are the staple methods for teaching oral skills and have many other uses. But what I do advocate is the use of mother tongue materials in some situations to deliver semantic content fast. For example, when we decide to use pair work, we need to pinpoint the skills that we want to develop in that particular session, and match the delivery system to the content. Let me illustrate with two situations:

Polite Requests

A standard method of teaching polite requests is to have students role play situations. The semantic content in these situations is relatively unimportant because the focus is on short conversational routines that can frame almost any kind of content, e.g.

Would you mind if I sat here?
Would you please pass the salt?
Could I possibly borrow your lighter?

A few cartoons and a bit of imagination are enough to deliver sufficient semantic content, and I would not suggest that any kind of translation-based stimulus is required.

Talking about the Future

This is much tougher and requires much more complex stimulus.

One way that natural translation skills can be used here is to have students write a page in their own language about what they think will happen in the next year of their lives. This now gives us some real content that can be processed in various ways. A pair of students can swap pages, study one another's pages, put them aside, and then interview one another in English. They might use their mother tongue account as the basis for a written English version – not necessarily a translation, but a bank of ideas that they have tried out in an interview, and which the teacher has helped them refine in English.

Now a lot of EFL teachers will find this quite horrifying. No doubt some will worry about some kind of interference from the mother tongue to English. My response to that is that the workings of the bilingual mind are much more complex than simple notions of interference – a little translation isn't going to cause permanent mental damage! In fact, if this is still a worry, putting the mother tongue material aside is the solution; what we are fairly sure of is that the semantic content is stored conceptually rather than linguistically. We don't remember the wording of what we have read, but the semantic content.

Translation and Cross-cultural Pragmatics

You might be surprised to know that the training of interpreters – especially community and court interpreters – is very much about cross-cultural pragmatics. Interpreters have to learn to be experts at conveying how things are said, as well as what is said. In court interpreting, for example, the best interpreters are the ones who can convey a witness's hesitancy, confidence, obsequiousness, respect, contempt, and so on. Our students use role plays for this kind of learning, with one student as interpreter, one as legal counsel and one as witness. This simple exercise provides a wealth of possibilities for discussion, debate and learning about the problems of conveying the interactive practices of one language in another language.

A difficulty that I see with EFL teaching and especially EFL materials is that learners are often expected to learn the interactive and communicative practices of the English speaking world in a vacuum. I don't believe that we can learn these practices without beginning from a solid point of reference, i.e. our own culture. Learning to communicate in

a new culture is very much a process of comparing and contrasting with what we already know. Now I concede that good EFL teachers draw on the cultural knowledge of their students; I can recall many classes where students were happy to talk about how things are done differently in their own culture. But let us not forget that language is the main vector of culture, and that the evidence of cross-cultural difference is found in communicative practices. An excellent way to expose those differences is through interpreting role play exercises, where students are confronted with the hard linguistic evidence. Here is a simple routine to get such an exercise going:

Students in threes prepare the framework of a dialogue; let's say that an Australian journalist is to interview an Indonesian Ministry spokesman about the present issue of illegal immigration. The framework can be written in either language, or both.

The teacher leads a discussion on the cross-cultural issues that may arise, e.g. Politeness formulas, terms of address, how to begin and terminate the interview, how to interrupt. This discussion can be a bilingual one.

The teacher and students propose ways of saying things appropriately in English, and compare and contrast the English strategies with the Indonesian ones.

Three students at a time role play the interview – one as journalist, one as Ministry official and one as interpreters.

The teacher leads a debriefing discussion; what went right, what went wrong. Again this discussion can be bilingual.

In my view, this is the essential exercise in discovering and practicing cross-cultural pragmatics[5].

[5] Reeves (1994) considers some types of translation and interpreting as "cultural intermediation".

CONCLUDING REMARKS

I want to finish by returning to the image of the two ocean liners. What I have tried to show is that the passengers on the SS EFL and the SS Translation have a good deal more in common that they think. It is certainly true that in some parts of the EFL world, multilingual classes make translation work very difficult. But as I have tried to show, some of the objections of the anti-translation camp are out of date and easily countered. In countries outside the EFL centers of influence, teachers can afford to be bold about finding innovative ways to incorporate translation into EFL: There is nothing to lose, and much to gain when we acknowledge the fifth macroskill.

I'd like to think that as the SS EFL and the SS Translation sail through the Straits of Malacca, the passengers are crowded on the decks and shouting "Come aboard!"

REFERENCES

Campbell, S. 1998. *Translation into the Second Language*. New York: Longman.

Dollerup, C. 1993. Systematic feedback in teaching translation. In C. Dollerup and A. Lindegaard (Eds.) *Teaching Translation and Interpreting 2. Insights, Aims, Visions. Papers from the Second Language International Conference* (pp.121-132) Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Hung, E. 1995. Translation curricula development in Chinese communities. In C. Dollerup and V. Appel (Eds.) *Teaching Translation and Interpreting 3. New Horizons. Papers from the Third Language International Conference* (pp.31-44) Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Kachru, B.B. 1985. Standards, codification and sociolinguistic realism:the English language in the outer circle. In R. QUIRK and H. WIDDOWSON (Eds.) *English in the World: Teaching and Learning of Language and Literature* (pp. 11-30). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Malkjaer, K. 1998. Introduction: Translation and language teaching. In K.Malmkjaer (Ed.) *Translation & Language Teaching. Language Teaching & Translation.* (pp. 1-11). Manchester: St. Jerome.

Muskat-Tabakowska, E. 1971. The function of translation in English language teaching. *Papers and Studies in Contrastive Linguistics* 1, 131-139.

Newson, D. 1998. Translation and foreign language learning. In K.Malmkjaer (Ed.) *Translation & Language Teaching. Language Teaching & Translation.* (pp. 63-68). Manchester: St. Jerome.

Philipson, R. 1992. *Linguistic Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Pisarska, A. 1998. Translation didactics and foreign language teaching. *Glottodidactica* 19, 95-106.

Reeves, N.B.R. 1994. Translating and interpreting as cultural intermediation – some theoretical issues reconsidered. In R. SEYMOUR and C.C. LIU (Eds.) *Translation and Interpreting: Bridging East and West* (pp. 33-50). Hawaii: University of Hawaii and the East-West Center.

Stibbard, R. 1994. The uses of translation in foreign language teaching. *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology* 2/1, 9-18.

Stibbard, R. 1998. The principled use of oral translation in foreign language teaching. In K.Malmkjaer (Ed.) *Translation & Language Teaching. Language Teaching & Translation.* (pp. 69-76). Manchester: St. Jerome.

Totawar, V. 1997. Does translation have a place in foreign language teaching and learning? *CIEFL Bulletin* (New Series) 9/1, 53-80.

UNESCO, http://www.unesco.org/human_rights/hrci.htm.

Zohrevandi, Z. 1992. Translation as a resource: Teaching English as a foreign language. In R. DE BEAUGRANDE, A.SHUNNAQ and M.H. HELIEL (Eds.) Language, Discourse and Translation in the West and Middle East (pp. 181-187). Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.