
RESOURCE BOOKS FOR TEACHERS

series editor
ALAN MALEY

TRANSLATION

Alan Duff



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To Michael Swan, poet and friend

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As a translator, he has published over 30 stage plays and films. He has also published several novels, short stories, and historical works.

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Foreword

Translation has long languished as a poor relation in the family of language teaching techniques. It has been denigrated as ‘uncommunicative’, ‘boring’, ‘pointless’, ‘difficult’, ‘irrelevant’, and the like, and has suffered from too close an association with its cousin, Grammar. Along with its other traditional cousins Literature, Dictation, Vocabulary, Reading Aloud, etc., it has been pushed into the methodological lumber room.

Only recently, as the communicative movement has begun to run short of ideas, has there been a resurgence of interest in traditional practices such as translation. Could it be that it serves some useful purpose after all? Could it be renovated, reinterpreted, humanized, made communicative?

Judging by the activities in Alan Duff’s book, the answer has to be ‘yes’. Its great originality lies in having successfully shifted the emphasis from *learning* translation as a set of discrete skills to *using* translation as a resource for the promotion of language learning. To quote from the Introduction ‘Translation develops three qualities essential to all language learning: accuracy, clarity, and flexibility. It trains the reader to search (flexibility) for the most appropriate words (accuracy) to convey what is meant (clarity).’

The activities are designed to develop these three qualities. Many of the activities can be used to develop language awareness, without necessarily proceeding to the final stage of translation at all. This will therefore be a book of value to those who wish to refine their students’ sensitivity to alternative ways of expressing meaning, as well as to those who wish to train their students to apply this sensitivity to rendering English texts into their own language.

‘Awareness raising’ has become a piece of facile jargon. However, few teachers or students who work through the activities in this book can fail to have their awareness of language heightened, and their perceptions changed.

Alan Maley

Introduction

Why translation?

Translation, as the process of conveying messages across linguistic and cultural barriers, is an eminently communicative activity, one whose use could well be considered in a wider range of teaching situations than may currently be the case.

(Dr Ian Tudor)

For the past two decades or more, translation has been generally out of favour with the language teaching community. (Almost, we might say, ‘sent to Siberia’!) Yet for thousands of years this ancient craft had been right at the heart of language learning. Indeed, of almost all learning, for many of the mediaeval universities developed out of what were originally schools of translation.

Yet today translation is largely ignored as a valid activity for language practice and improvement. And even where it is still retained, it tends to be used not for language teaching, but for testing.

The main reason for this, I think, is that over the centuries translation had gradually become fossilized. It became less and less associated with the excitement of new discoveries, more and more with the tedium of book learning. What should have been a vital and challenging discipline had degenerated in most schools into a pointless routine exercise, a chore, and a punishment.

If translation has fallen from favour in our times, it is largely because teachers feel, with some justification, that:

- a. it is text-bound, and confined to only two skills – reading and writing; it is not a communicative activity because it involves no oral interaction
- b. it is not suitable for classroom work because the students must do the writing on their own; it is also time-consuming and wasteful
- c. it is associated with ‘different language’, with literary or scientific texts, and is not suited to the general needs of the language learner.

The widespread use of literary-type texts for translation seems to us both an anachronistic and a wasteful activity if the wider objective of work in translation is deemed to be one of informing *all other areas* of the learners’ communicative repertoire.

(A. G. Weymouth, *my italics*)

- d. use of the mother tongue is required, and this is not desirable
- e. and, finally, it is boring – both to do, and to correct.

This may be the case, but it need not be so. Translation does not have to be a lone, pointless struggle between student and text. Many other approaches are possible. Translation can be introduced, purposefully and imaginatively, into the language learning programme. There, I believe, it deserves its place – along with other approaches – for the reasons that follow.

Reasons for using translation in the classroom

1 Influence of the mother tongue

We all have a mother tongue, or first language. This shapes our way of thinking, and to some extent our use of the foreign language (pronunciation, choice of words, tone, word order, etc.).

Translation helps us to understand better the influence of the one language on the other, and to correct errors of habit that creep in unnoticed (such as the misuse of particular words or structures). And, because translation involves contrast, it enables us to explore the potential of both languages – their strengths and weaknesses.

2 Naturalness of the activity

Translation is a natural and necessary activity. More so, indeed, than many of the fashionable activities invented for language learners. Outside the classroom – in offices, banks, factories, shops, and airports – translation is going on all the time. Why not inside the classroom?

3 The skills aspect

Language competence is a two-way, not a one-way system. We need to be able to communicate both ways: into and from the foreign language. Textbooks, understandably, place great emphasis on competence in the foreign language. Yet little guidance is given on how to communicate back into the mother tongue, as many professionals need to do in their daily work. Translation is ideally suited for practising this vital skill.

4 The reality of language

The proper material of translation is authentic, not ‘made up’ language. And all language is relevant to translation – all styles and registers of both speech and writing. Translation need not be confined to literature!

Because the material is authentic and wide-ranging in scope, the

learner is being brought into touch with the whole language, and not just those parts isolated by the textbook. This is an aim to be found in almost all course descriptions: 'to increase the students' power and range of expression'. Translation will certainly do this.

5 Usefulness

As a language learning activity, translation has many merits. Chief among these are:

- a. It is an activity which, by its very nature, invites speculation and discussion. In translation, there is rarely a 'right' answer (though there may be several wrong ones!). It is not necessary for all the work in class to be done alone and in writing. Students can work in groups for oral discussion. The texts, which can be very short, serve as material both for reading and for discussion.
- b. Translation develops three qualities essential to all language learning: accuracy, clarity, and flexibility. It trains the learner to search (flexibility) for the most appropriate words (accuracy) to convey what is meant (clarity). This combination of freedom and constraint allows the students to contribute their own thoughts to a discussion which has a clear focus – the text.
- c. Depending on the students' needs, and on the syllabus, the teacher can select material to illustrate particular aspects of language and structure with which the students have difficulty in English (for instance, prepositions, articles, *if*-clauses, the passive). By working through these difficulties in the mother tongue, the students come to see the link between language (grammar) and usage. An example of this is the use of the passive in signs and notices (PARKING PROHIBITED, NO CREDIT ALLOWED) in English. In another language these might be rendered differently (Do not Park Here, We Give No Credit).
- d. Translators will always be needed. Without them, there would be no summit talks, no *glasnost* or *perestroika*, no Cannes Film Festival, no Nobel prizes, no advances in medicine, science, or engineering, no international law, no Olympic Games, no *Hamlet*, no *War and Peace* . . .

And who is to do all this necessary work? Either the professionals themselves, or the students of language. Only translation can give them the training they need.

Rationale of the book

It must be stressed that this book is not a training manual for professional translators (though they could certainly use it). Nor is

it a coursebook on how to teach translation (though plenty of advice is offered). *Translation* is a resource book for teachers who wish to use *translation* as a language learning activity, just as they might use *literature, drama, project work, conversation, role play, writing, or class readers* for language practice and improvement.

The aim of *Translation* is to provide the teacher with source material (in English) which reflects most characteristic features of the language (-*ing* forms, compounds, *if*-clauses, articles, etc.); which gives students practice in translating a variety of styles and registers (colloquial, formal, and idiomatic usages); which provides a basis for writing and discussion; and which is suitable for use with the many different translation techniques suggested.

1 Practice

Students of language are often required to translate, but they are rarely given any practice in the skill. Textbooks and examination papers toss at them questions beginning: 'Translate the following sentences into Gujarati/French/Hungarian/Dutch . . .' But the sentences are often made up, or the texts chosen specifically for their 'language traps'. This is an abuse of translation.

One of the aims of this book is to suggest that there is no point in merely handing out texts to the students once a week with the instruction: 'Translate!' This is a random approach which serves little purpose.

Practice in translation does not mean setting written assignments to be returned to the students with the errors marked in red. It means, rather, giving the students regular opportunities to compare and discuss their work with others, and to respond to suggestions.

2 Purpose

Translation takes time, care, and thought. A student who has to spend an hour, maybe two hours, struggling over a text may want to ask: 'Why am I doing this? Could not the time be better spent?'

If the teacher cannot explain why the activity is being done – and this holds for all kinds of language activity – the student is likely to feel frustrated.

This is why I have grouped the activities in *Translation* under headings which should give the teacher a clear, if general, idea of the language focus (for example, *word order, stress, compounds, passive forms, etc.*).

Students are often asked to translate without being given any introduction to the kind of material they will be working on. As a result, they are not mentally prepared for the activity. This is a weakness I wished to avoid. Hence the importance given in the book to the *warm-up* activities. These are generally oral tasks

designed to set the students thinking along specific lines. So, for instance, before working on texts which focus on the translation of articles, they first suggest titles of songs, books, or films in English, and offer oral translations.

3 Time

One of the strongest objections to the use of translation is that it is time-consuming and 'wasteful'. And, indeed, it often is. There is little point in asking 20 or 30 people to sit silently in a room translating the same text. They might just as well do the work at home.

In order to avoid this wastage, and to make best use of the students' time, I have followed certain basic principles in devising the activities:

- a. all students should be equally involved in the task; nobody should be kept 'hanging around'
- b. the activities should involve as much oral translation as possible; the writing can often be done in the form of notes, to be used in later discussion
- c. the material itself should preferably be short and varied (longer texts being reserved mainly for out-of-class work)
- d. time-limits should be set, where necessary, in order to prevent the students from getting 'stuck', and to ensure that sufficient time is left for discussion.

This does not mean, however, that the students should be hurried, or encouraged to make hasty decisions. To prevent this happening, I have designed the task sheets (of passages for translation) in such a way that the students work only on a little material at a time. This also helps to keep their interest alive, as it allows for the circulation of fresh material. In all the activities, I have tried to strike a balance between giving the students too much time to think, and too little. Translation constantly involves making choices. The longer you sit on the fence, the harder it is to make up your mind. Often the best solutions occur to us after the thinking has been done and a choice made. The function of the discussion, then, is to give the students time for further reflection, and a chance to change their minds.

4 Material

Since this book was designed to be used by language teachers all over the world, it was important, I felt, that the material should satisfy the two requirements implicit in the title *Translation*. Firstly, it should illustrate the most common basic principles, problems, challenges, and strategies of translation in general. Secondly, it should provide the teacher with material directly relevant to the study of English and, in particular, to language practice through the medium of translation *from* English.

In order to avoid confusion, and to keep the fundamental concept