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Bachelor's thesis

Translation as a tool for language teaching and learning

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1.0 Introduction

Learning and teaching a language is a demanding task for both students and teachers alike. Methods concerning ways to teach language is a dynamic topic that is always open for new arguments and discussion in the interest of finding new tools to help with teaching and learning. In this paper I will look at translation used as a method for language teaching. More directly, based on several empirical research paper in recent years, what are the pros and cons of using translation as a tool in the EFL/ESL classroom? This paper will give some insight into how diverse the topic of translation is in the case of language teaching. With the con aspect of my question, I will focus on some papers that shows an assessment issue with translation as a teaching tool. With the pros aspect of my question, I will focus on some research papers that looks at translation in teaching as a motivator and how it can be used in the classroom. With this I will discuss and try to conclude the position of translation in language teaching.

1.1 Background

For many years there was a general consensus among scholars in different countries that the use of translation in learning a new language was more damaging then helpful. To best learn a new language, it was most efficient to only be exposed to the new language and leave out the main language of the students. Cook (2010) gives a good overview of the history of translation in an educational context. He states that a reason that translation has long been looked down upon in teaching is how it was practiced in the past. The Grammar Translation method focused on translation in the sense of grammatical features from one language to another. This was a very one-sided and tedious task, which made it an easy target for arguments against its usefulness. The notion of translation in Grammar Translation was used mainly as a word-for-word translation from one language to another. The Direct Method came in the late 1800 which focus was that students using their own language in the process of learning another language was in no way productive. Only the new language was to be used when learning a new language with the Direct Method. In more recent years, a revitalised view on translation in language learning has arisen, with several papers arguing the positive sides of the use of translation in language teaching. The method for this paper will be to look

at several papers which experiments and tests different approaches to translation in language teaching. All these different types of research will hopefully help in establishing a form of answer to the question asked in this paper.

2.0 The studies

2.1.0 Cons

2.1.1 Translation as a teaching tool in assessment

Most of the paper that looks at translation as a negative addition to the language classroom builds their arguments in the basis of grammar-translation. Further, the researchers look at how translation is used in testing and assessing in figuring out a student's proficiency level. Buck (1992) is clear in his statement that translation as a test for proficiency is not the ideal way of figuring out a student's proficiency, but rather how well they are at translating. An empirical study done by Schjoldager (2017) looks at the difference in the products produced by the students when the written task is either prompted by an image or is a translation of a text. She concludes that there is a visible difference in the number of errors made with the translation task, compared to the image task. She supports the reasoning for this in the arguments of Coleman (1986) and Marsh (1987) which does not believe that translation is a suitable tool for the testing of proficiency in the language. Schjoldager states in her conclusion that this does not give indications as to how this result should be viewed in the light of translation as a teaching tool as a whole.

Källkvist (1998), as discussed by Vermes (2010), has a similar research approach as Schjoldager and shows that the question of translation as teaching tool for testing proficiency is not optimal and needs to be supported by other assessment tools. The study shows the same difference in error when translating as the study done by Schjoldager. This could be supported by the arguments made that with translation teaching, the influence that the mother tongue gets in this environment of translation becomes too big. The students are halted in seeing the bigger picture of learning a new language and concludes that learning a language is about finding the one-to-one translation ratio for every word. The general notion from teachers in the past which argue that the use of translation in the classroom will slow down the learning process is founded much in what Butzkamm writes in his paper. Here he quotes Percival Gurrey who argues that "the mother tongue acts as a block in all the learners' language

reactions and impedes the learning of the new language” (Butzkamm, 2007, p.12) which could create some trouble when leaning a new language.

2.2.0 Pros

2.2.1 Practical use of L1 in learning L2

An empirical study done by Ramachandran & Rahim looks at the notion of transition in the brain from translation to understanding when learning a new language. Here they look at how translation could have an impact in expanding the vocabulary in ESL learners of English. The result in this experiment of elementary level learners of English clearly shows that the use of translation methods in learning the vocabulary of a new language is effective compared to a non-translative method (Ramachondran & Rahim 2004). Arguments given in their conclusive remarks states that they see a positive effect in using the L1 language to fall back on when trying the figure out the semantics of the new L2 language. The results here show that translation could be an important tool for early English learners. But this begs the question if the use of translation in the vocabulary/lexical aspects of a language could also be used in other aspects. Pym et al. presents an argument that disputes the fact that L1 use in language learning diminishes parallel with proficiency. He states that perhaps the excelled proficiency only hides to use of L1 translation more and that, in fact, it is just as prominent as a *silent translation* in the minds of the students (Pym et al. 2013).

Comparing this to a study done by Friedlander in 1990 who was also interested in seeing how the interaction between L1 and L2 has on the outcome of written text in the L2. He hypothesises that “positive transfer of first language-related content will be enhanced when writers write using the language in which the information was acquired” (p, 111). By testing this hypothesis, he saw if there were any changes in the quality of a produced paper in L2 by which the planning of the paper was done in L1. By combining the acquired knowledge on the subject obtain by L1 to production of an essay in L2 on the same subject saw a significant improvement on the essay produced. This sort of translation is an unorthodox method of translation in schools, but it shows that the use of L1 in a language learning situation of L2 has benefits in the way of theoretical information that is to be acquired in the new language. Combining this with the studies of Ramachondran & Rahim it paints a picture of a use of translation that could give more fruitful results in the future. When moving up the grades in school, the curriculum of what is to be learnt from the second language teaching is

continuously expanding. On reaching a certain grade, the focus of the language teaching is no longer on the language itself but the world in which the language is used and its nuances. The research here shows that translation has a positive effect at several levels of proficiency. Combining this with the “content based language teaching” (p.105), which focuses on using a second language while still learning a new subject, that Cook (2010) writes about creates a fleshed out method of teaching that may be used as a helpful tool for teachers.

Another research paper written by Cahnmann (2005) shows another side of this use of translation between L1 and L2 as a tool for better learning. Similar to Friedlander and Ramachondran & Rahim, this paper sets out to see what practical effects translation has in the classroom. Here she looks at a bilingual classroom consisting of Spanish and English students where her intentions are to see if a more practical approach to translation can have an effect on ESL (2005). Her objective with this study was, through following a class for a year, to see if the use of both Spanish and English in a bilingual classroom could help the students to learn English more productively. She concludes that this sort of practical work with language and translation can be helpful for students to improve their semantic understanding of both languages in a more cooperative state and a more nuanced way of explaining something in both L1 and L2. By looking at a translated work and discussing whether or not the translation produced is an accurate translation of meaning from L2 to L1 gives the students room for self-reflection as to the meaning from one language to another.

2.2.2 Learners attitude towards translation in language teaching and increased motivation

With every method of teaching there is always the variable of how students view the different topics of study they are presented. In most cases where students do not feel a sense of accomplishment, a change in teaching method is needed. A study done in 2019 by Navidinia, Akar and Hendevalan uses a questionnaire to figure out the view that students have towards the helpfulness of translation in the language learning process. Their intention was to see if the use of translation had an effect in the aspects of linguistic, humanistic and practical perspectives of language learning. The questions they had were varied as to get the best possible overview on the general feeling towards translation the participants had. Their conclusion is that the response from the students were largely positive towards the use of

translation in their language learning. This is a good example of a study which directly questions the students on the receiving end of the teaching of a foreign language. There will always be individual differences when looking at the way students look at different methods of translation. But, seeing the answers given here in this study shows that they much prefer the method of translation and use of their own language, rather than solely using the foreign language.

Pym et al.'s (2013) paper is similar in that they look at how translation is viewed on a grander scale. They look at several European countries and looks at how they view or use translation in language teaching. Here the focus of the use of questionnaires was with a group of experts and a group of teachers. This sort of research on a bigger scale shows a more general view on the subject through many different individuals from different countries, cultures and educational background. This is a very extensive study which looks at many different aspects concerning translation and concluded rather concretely that “the general consensus among teachers and theorists of language education is that translation can indeed contribute to effective language learning” (Pym et al. 2013) (p.37).

Adding on to this study of students view on the use of translation, comes a study done by Levine (2003) which looks at how motivation can be increased if the inclusion of the students L1 is more actively used. If the students find the language being taught to be too much of a challenge, the motivation decreases and anxiety to use it increases. None of which creates a good learning environment. This reflects the notion that is presented by Navidinia et al. and their research on learner attitudes. Most of the students felt that translation has a positive effect on them and their learning, so it would naturally lead to the increased motivation that Levine explores. To have the option of using the language one is most familiar with when the learning another language becomes too difficult, leads to less negative attitude towards to learning of the new language. By not forcing the students to only use to second language that they are supposed to learn, but rather combine the learning environment with both first and second language, Levine (2003) saw in his study that this had a positive effect in the sense that the students were more willing to use the second language, because the first language was readily available if one got stuck or did not remember. Looking back at the language acquisition paper from Ramachondran & Rahim, it could be linked to this in a way of improving the rate of which the language in being learnt as well. By discussing the meaning of the second language words or phrases in the first language, one could more easily establish a better understanding of the second language in a shorter amount of time.

3.0 Discussion

With the increase in attention that translation in language teaching has gotten in the past years, it is clearly a positive trend that is occurring within litterateur concerning this topic. If we switch the focus on research paper to a decade earlier concerning the same topic, it would probably have given a negative trend in how to view translation. There are not many papers in recent years which focus on if the use of translation has a negative effect on the teaching and learning of language. But with the research papers viewed here, they have in common that they state the fact that the view of translation in teaching has been negative and points to why it has been so. This is to show some validity as to why they are testing and proving that these past notion towards translation are wrong. For a teacher, just like any other profession, there are different tools for different jobs. Still there is research that explores sides of translation that is not compatible with different part of the teaching and learning process. All these statistical research papers show that the pedagogical tool for language learning that is translation has been hidden away for long time based on poorly researched arguments.

3.1.0 The research papers

3.1.1 Cons

As we have seen, the research looked at in this paper is varied in the sense of what is being examined but the ones discussing the cons has a common denominator. With the negative aspects of translation, some research focuses on the use of translation as means of figuring out the students' proficiency in the language being learned. In her introduction, Schjoldager states that the papers directed towards the negative aspects of translation in teaching is avoiding the subject of translation as a teaching method on the fact that the subject has been so heavily criticised with the poor performance of the grammar-translation method. This becomes apparent in the amount of research that is available and conducted on the topic of the cons of translation as a tool or method for language teaching.

Another thing to note when discussing the cons of translation in language teaching is that the paper that presents such arguments are mainly older paper such as the papers written by Coleman (1987) and Marsh (1987). In contrast with the pros side of the question asked in this paper, it is more apparent that the interest and popularity of the positive sides of translation in teaching har risen in recent years. Every research paper on the positive aspect of

translation in language teaching, with the exception of Freidlander (1990), is between 2000 to present day. This new trend is also reflected in the number of papers that was found here on the pros in comparison to the cons. The nature of the topic in present discussion is clearly in the direction drawing forth the positive sides of translation. The papers presenting the negative effects of translation could be seen as arguments for what is lacking in translation as a teaching, namely the use of translation as an assessment tool.

An additional thing to consider is, even if there are fewer papers that look at the negative effects of translation in language teaching there is another aspect of it that could be considered negative in the bigger picture. Cook (2010) gives arguments in his chapter on pedagogical side of translation and points out the difference between teachers of a language. With the now rising popularity of the positive effects of translation in language teaching, it is natural that the need for teachers who are bilingual and native speakers of the same language as the students that is becoming the norm. For translation to be optimised from L2 to L1, the teacher must preferably be a native speaker to fully take advantage of translation in an educational aspect. The negative effect that this can produce is in the position of the teachers that are native speakers. Certainly, there are great teacher that are native speakers of the language they teach which would become underprioritized in positions of language teaching.

3.1.2 Pros

With the papers looking at arguments for the use of translation (Ramachondran & Rahim 2004) (Freidlander, 1990) (Cahnmann, 2005) (Pym et al., 2013) and the views on translation by teachers and students (Navidinia, Akar & Hendevalan, 2019) (Pym et al., 2013) (Levine, 2003) it is apparent that the researchers engaged with the topic of translation in language teaching is in an academic environment where many different ideas and theories are argued and tested. The research papers chosen for this paper, in the positive light of translation, was in part to show the variation that the topic of translation as a teaching tool is going through in academia. In addition, this could also be seen as though translation has several different ways in which it could be implemented in teaching. As time passes, research will probably give light to aspects of translation which does not compute with the teaching and learning of language, as seen with assessment. This surge of research on the topic at present could be seen focusing on the theoretical ideas that will most likely give a positive result so that translation is put in the best light as possible in the beginning of this resurrection of the topic. There are a lot of variables that needs to be addressed with figuring out teaching methods that

is beneficial for both students and teachers, and these studies presented in this paper shows promise to the position of translation as a teaching tool. Time will tell, perhaps through more practical studies such as Freidlander (1990) or neurological studies of language such as Mestres-Missé et al. (2006), where the position of translation truly is.

Traxler, in his chapter about bilingualism, writes about the acquisition of a second language in the *language sensitivity* age (adolescent) is based heavily on the use of cooperation of the two lexicons of language in the brain (Traxler, 2012). This could mean that the brain uses the language which it is most familiar with or has the biggest lexicon of, to unravel the meaning of the phonology of a different language. He also points out that learners of a second language “progress from translating L2 terms into their L1 equivalents to accessing conceptual representations directly from the L2 terms” (Traxler, 2012) (p. 437). This gives reasons to argue that a sort of silent translation is happening in students learning a second language (Carreres, 2006). Traxler (2012) states that “Individual differences in cognitive skills such as verbal working memory capacity and phonological memory ability both influence how rapidly people can acquire an L2” (p. 437) which could be used as an argument for variations of language learning. Combined with the notion that “the mother tongue is there, even though one would like it not to be” (Butzkamm, 13) there is good reason to further look at translation in language teaching, at least in the sense of teaching variation. This is something that becomes clear throughout the research papers surrounding the topic. The more methods a teacher has in the classroom, the better the teaching presumably will become.

As a final remark on the discussion of translation there are several arguments to be found with language in neural biology as stated previously. A paper written Mestres-Missé et al. (2006) is conducting experiments on this matter. The main purpose of the experiment done in this paper was to figure out if the brain could manage to create meaning out of entirely new words with the use of meaning of the other words in a sentence. Without going in to too much detail surrounding the how they did it, the more interesting thing to look at is the results. They found out that the brain does not need more than 3 sentences containing a new word for it to be acknowledged by the brain as a word. Where it becomes relevant for the question of translation is that this meaning acquisition shows that with the use of knowledge from previous learnt words, it is much easier to establish meaning to new words if they are in the same semantic setting. This same notion can be transferable to learning a new language. By using the semantics of L1 in order to give a synonym for a word with the same meaning in

both languages but different sound and writing. Early language acquisition of a new learner of a language will be dependent on the semantics of their native language to create a semantic connection between two different languages. Placing this kind of research in perspective of the literature of practical use of translation in teaching (Ramachondran & Rahim 2004) (Freidlander, 1990) (Cahnmann, 2005) it could create an interesting new approach to research in the future and a more scientific conclusion to the question of translation as a tool for language teaching.

4.0 Conclusion

This paper has presented several research papers that has had as an objective to see if there are any valid or invalid reason to open classrooms more to the method of translation in language teaching. The research papers here are far from all the research that is being done on the topic of translation and the results of the research will surely inspire further research on the topic. We have seen in this paper some pros and cons concerning the use of translation. Where the cons were in focus, it became obvious that the views here could be seen as outdated and the research done in modern times, as included here, shows more the side of where translation falls a bit short. The pros research shows a wider approach to the topic and the literature, on the positive side of translation in language teaching, reflects an explosion of reinvigorated interest in the topic. With all of this taken into consideration, it can be concluded, through the research papers, that the use of translation in language teaching has a valid place in the classroom and could be considered a helpful tool for teachers. Translation as a tool for teaching and learning should be an exciting topic to follow in years to come for all language teachers. I believe that further research should focus on the results that translation in language teaching produces with students and with this information see more directly how it compares to other methods of language teaching.

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