Translation As A Technique In Foreign Language Acquisition

Introduction

Translation in a layman's definition is the act of rendering in another language what already exists in a given language. The translation in question here is of course inter-lingual and not intra-lingual nor inter-semiotic (see Kelly 1979). This paper will not attempt to state or argue whether this act of rendering is an 'art' or a 'science'. Rather, it sees it as a technique in the sense that translation is done in schools as a discipline in Modern European Languages Departments. It is in this perspective that the present paper will look at the learning and teaching of foreign languages. It actually pinpoints translation as a technique by bringing out specifically its main functions in the acquisition of a foreign language.

Theories and practice of translation have been propounded and expounded, however, with much emphasis on professional translation. Very little has been done on pedagogic translation - what Vinay and Darbelnet (1958: 24) regard as 'traduction scolaire' or simply translation done in schools. Students' attitude and motivation towards learning a foreign language can change tremendously if they are made to realise the aims and objectives of the translation study. The discussions that follow aim at bringing out the main objectives of translation as a technique for acquiring any foreign language. The discussions are based on three main areas, viz. acquisition process, language proficiency and verification.

Acquisition Process

The main aim and objective of translation as a technique of language appropriation is the process of *acquisition*. This process is very effective through the use of dictionaries, moreso, as they cannot be dissociated from any language acquisition. Most often, language acquisition is considered mainly on the lexical level whereas other levels of enrichment are ignored and neglected. The acquisition process permeates various levels which shall be considered here: lexical, semantic, syntactic, structural, and cultural acquisitions.

Translation done in schools is a very good means of acquiring new vocabulary. In as much as it was frowned at and even condemned,[1] one

[1] J.P. Vinay and J. Darbelnet. *Stylistique Comparée du francais et de l' anglais*. Paris: Didier 1958, p: 24, consider translation done in school as: "La traduction scolaire peut

wonders why it is still very much an integral part and parcel of Modern European Languages Departments. This goes to prove that there must be a very major role it is playing or is intended to play in foreign language learning consciously or unconsciously. Jacques David (1975: 131) did not mince words when he stated that translation of 'theme' is a very good method of learning a foreign language. By 'theme' is meant the translation into a foreign language. It is pertinent to note here that the acquisition process is better achieved through the practice of 'theme'.

The acquisition process of new lexis or vocabulary is not as easy as it seems to look. This is because it entails the intricacies involved in the use of dictionaries. It is not enough to consult a bilingual dictionary for a corresponding word in the target language. There is the problem of selection of the appropriate word amidst a list of *synonyms* and possible *antonyms*. Unfortunately, bilingual dictionaries do not give the meaning of words. The question of selection of the appropriate word is intricately linked with semantic acquisition often neglected. Often, students stop at the lexical acquisition process in the course of translating a text and very easily lose such mechanically acquired items because they lack understanding of their implications and thus their applications thereby producing shocking structures and sentences. It is therefore not sufficient to amass a vast range of lexical terms without necessarily knowing their semantic implications and their usage. They must be applied in the appropriate context.

Semantic acquisition of lexical terms could be enhanced by synonyms and possibly by antonyms as well. The denotation and connotation of the lexical terms are equally very pertinent in semantic acquisition. This acquisition should go along with their collocations so as to produce good structures. Translation exercises do not deal with isolated lexical items. Rather, they form a composition of words guided by rules. In other words, there is the bid to acquire the syntax of the foreign language through translation. Yet, this is not to say that it should turn to a grammar class. It will be very difficult to do translation without understanding the grammatical nature of the languages involved.

être soit un procédé de vérification). Il permet alors de s'assurer si les élèves ont assimil é les mots et les tours de la langue étrangère (thè,e) ou s'ils sont capables de saisir et de rendre le sens et les nuances d'un texte étranger (Version) ."

Syntactic acquisition cannot be disintegrated from the structural acquisition. However, simple structures should lead to more complex ones and not vice versa, otherwise, the enrichment becomes mixed up and the aim eventually defeated.

An aspect which is often overlooked is the cultural enrichment of facts got from texts or passages to be translated. Depending on the text, one could be exposed to as many fields as possible, although, most often literary texts of prose are used to avoid complex terminologies at this level. This process can only be made worth while if constantly put into practice.

Language Proficiency

The acquisition process which actually aims at amassing new words and their meaning is insufficient in learning a foreign language. Translation activities expose students to acquisition in all its ramifications. This in turn produces a kind of linguistic proficiency in a systematic, gradual and steady manner in mastering the foreign language. The proficiency process covers the same levels as the acquisition process: lexical, semantic, syntactic, structural, and cultural. At these levels, the aim is to achieve a certain level of mastery, competence, fluency, and perfection of the foreign language. Unfortunately, very little attention is paid to drills and even when they are given, they are not marked, and even when marked, corrections are not made. The teacher, rather than battle with drills to correct, battles with "publish or perish".

Language proficiency through translation drills is necessary if the acquisition process must go on. The drills serve as checks to the accumulation; they help students apply what has been acquired. The exercises eventually help to fix the knowledge in their memory. This process also checks linguistic interferences especially in the areas of meaning, style and spelling.

However, it is advisable to maintain the translation of 'theme' as this tends more to improve student's vocabulary and proficiency of the foreign language. It is of importance to start with graded simple structures to complex structures and eventually to texts or passages. The texts should be carefully selected. Absurd, awkward and distorted translations should be immediately corrected. Students should be made to understand the use of bilingual dictionaries and other relevant dictionaries in order to improve

the foreign language. But they should be made to realise that they have to work without it during examinations. Suffice it to say at this juncture in the words of Peter Newmark that

> translation is a two-edged instrument; it has the special purpose of demonstrating the learner's knowledge of the foreign language, either as a form of control or to exercise his intelligence in order to develop his competence. (Newmark 1986: 7).

Verification

Vinay and Darbelnet (1958: 24) actually distinguish between professional translation and pedagogic translation which they term 'traduction scolaire'. They see translation done in school as either an acquisition process or a process of verification. This paper however marries the two processes especially as 'theme' tends to favour the acquisition process while 'version' is seen more or less as a verification process. 'Version' is translating from the foreign language in order to ascertain the level of knowledge, the skill and competence one has really attained in the foreign language. This rendering is usually considered to be simple compared to 'theme' This is probably because the target language is a habitual language of expression. On this note, this will obviously serve as a means of crosschecking one's understanding of the foreign language. Translation teachers find themselves in a fix when 'version' does not serve the purpose it is intended to - i.e. to verify one's ability in understanding the foreign language. In order to avoid such embarrassment and dilemma, translation exercises should either be in 'theme' or 'version' for a given period and not both as this may complicate things for students. This could destroy the aims and objectives of translation as a discipline. The verification process (version) should only be introduced at a later stage of the degree programme and be administered concurrently with 'theme'.

Conclusion

So far, translation as practised in schools has been the object of this discussion, especially as it relates to the acquisition of foreign languages. Unfortunately, pedagogic translation is usually taken for granted and very rarely discussed. There is no doubt that it is a very good means of enriching one's vocabulary, enhacing one's perspective of cultural perception and attaining a level of proficiency and perfection through drills in the practice of translation. Hitherto, a jumbled approach of both 'theme' and 'version' had been the practice. This could be the reason why very little

positive results are obtained and students find it very difficult. I therefore recommend a more systematic and sequential approach to bring about the derived goals of translation technique by making the following suggestions:

i. Translation drills should start with simple sentence structures, proceeding to more complex ones before passages are introduced.
ii. More translation exercises should be given to students.
iii. Translation drills on 'theme' should be given during the first year of introducing the course.
iv. Drills on 'version' should be introduced at a later stage in the degree programme. Alternatively, 'theme' should be in the first year of translation and 'version' in the first semester of the last year of translation and both could be alternated in the second semester of the last year.
v. The use of a bilingual dictionary during translation tests and examinations should be abolished. This will make students sit up and work relentlessly in a bid to acquire more knowledge of the foreign language.
vi. Translation teachers should be more dedicated and committed especially with the correction of drills.

Translation discipline could serve as a means of observation and investigation of foreign languages. This, of course, is in the domain of comparative study.

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