Language 1 in the Teaching, and Learning, of English Language and Literature

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Abstract

This paper revisits the pros and cons of using translation (more exactly, the mother tongue) in the teaching and learning of a foreign language and literature, and concludes the use of L1, if used *properly* and *judiciously*, is a needful, and worthy, pedagogical ally in the teaching, and learning, of English, as language and literature, across all levels from basic school through university.

It has often been held as anathema to use translation as a tool in foreign language teaching. However, considering recent research in bilingual education, applied linguistics and TEFL, new attitudes in foreign language teaching and teachers' experiences, mine including, I argue translation can be had as a worthy ally not only in foreign language teaching, in our context, English, but also in foreign literature teaching, and, again, in the Arab context, mostly English literature, at school, college and university levels.

Since the heyday of the attitude to language as communication (1950s and '60's, in particular) and the later modification (1970s) to this attitude by cognitive theories towards learning (see Colina (2002:2), there has been a resurrection of respectability to translation as a tool in language learning, and teaching, amongst language teaching professionals (see Alan Duff (1989)) in the Oxford University Press publication *Resources Books for Teachers*, and Margherita Ulrych (1996) in the Cambridge University Press publication Cambridge Language Reference News, in Kirsten Malmkjaer, ed., Translation and Language Teaching (1988:1).

As Malmkjaer (Ibid:1) points out, support for the revival of the practice of translation in foreign language teaching has been coming from recent research in applied linguistics. She quotes Cook (1996) asserting translation promotes multilingual competence, and, therefore, serves as a valuable tool in language teaching, and Selinker (1992; 1996) arguing for translation playing a role in interlanguage competence.

In her (edited) book (Ibid), the articles by Klein-Braley and Franklin, Stibbard and Anderman also adopt similar views. Stibbard (Ibid:69) argues first language is a "valuable resource" and "its use in EFL settings is not detrimental to foreign language development". In fact, he goes so far as to suggest that translation as an "ongoing element in a teaching program" serves as a "fifth skill alongside the four other skills…" He (74) concludes that translation can be "aimed at helping learners to develop communicative strategies, oral fluency and the skill of using the foreign language creatively".

Stibbard, however, wisely warns that for translation to be used usefully as a pedagogical tool, teachers, as well as students, need to be aware of the principles of translation theory lest they fall into the quagmire of the Grammar Translation Method. This is especially true when translation is used at an advanced level.

Anderman (Ibid:45) says, with confidence, “language teaching through translation is now reasserting its position on the school curriculum after a few decades in the cold…” She refers to a survey of the teaching of translation at British universities, in which nineteen out of twenty-one institutions responding to a questionnaire indicates “translation was taught as a way of improving students’ linguistic proficiency, that translation is used to consolidate L2 constructions for active use and monitor and improve comprehension of L2”. She (46) concludes the survey shows students are attracted by translation courses, a finding that is corroborated by many an Arab university teacher’s experience. She (46) rightly adds translation as a teaching exercise leads to text awareness on the part of students. Drawing upon my experience, it is awareness not only of the target (language) text (TT) but also of the source (language) text (ST) as well. Popovic (www.sueleatherassociates.com/pdfs/Article_translationinlanguageteaching.pdf:2) also finds that translation as a teaching strategy raises (students’) awareness of the inevitable interaction between languages 1 and 2.

Popovic (Ibid:2) cites two empirical studies that prove that translation does promote language learning and proficiency. The first is undertaken by O’Malley and Chamot to investigate learning strategies used by students of English as a second language, and also by learners of Spanish and Russian in a foreign language setting. One big finding is that translation has accounted for over 30% of strategy uses. Popovic (2) concludes translation as a teaching method “should receive due treatment”.

The second study is by Fried-Lander (1990). One finding of this study is that “'Translation from the native language into English appears to help rather than hinder writers: they were able to access more information when working in their first language'” (2).

Shiyab and Abdullateef (2001:7) also mention an experimental project conducted at the Polish University of Poznan, which “'confirms that student groups at the English Department that were trained by translation techniques had better results in developing the skills of speaking and writing than the groups that did not use translation techniques'”. The two researchers agree translation is a significant technique in the teaching of foreign language skills.

In this last context, I cannot but agree with an old-time researcher, Paul Kern (1905), that translation, in the forms of transmission, paraphrasing or reproduction in the foreign language, must be sometimes used, perhaps often but never always, that the more divergent the expressions, the more necessary translation becomes, that translation enriches vocabulary and deepens feeling for the language (and for L1, I can add), and that the center of gravity is always to be had in the FL/2nd L.

I am also in support of Colina (2002) when she says that “in 2nd language acquisition, translation, as a form of language use, is not a language transfer exercise or a search and replace operation, but an activity performed with the objective of achieving a particular communicative function across cultural and linguistic barriers”. i.e., translation as a method that facilitates language acquisition through emphasis on language use for communication.

Colina (Ibid) ends her article by calling for "fostering closer interaction among SLA, language teaching and translation studies", the lack of which has, perhaps, been behind the many arguments, always reiterated, against the use of translation in the F/2nd L classroom. These arguments are summed up by Newson, in Malmkjaer (1998:63-4), and rephrased by Shiyab and Abdullateef (2001:4) – interalios – particularly in regard to first language interference, to deprivation (of student) of the whole use of target language, to the illusion (on the part of student) that there is a one-to-one correspondence (between the two languages), to the harm (translation) does to fluency, to the inhibition (of student) of thinking in the foreign language, to the production of compound (rather than coordinate) bilingualism, and, lastly, to the direction of student's attention (that translation causes) to formal properties of the language (rather than to its communicative functions).

Malmkjaer (1998) herself, in her Introduction (2-9) sketches – succinctly – the objections (to the use of translation in learning and teaching) and the rebuttals and, convincingly, concludes that "translation might profitably be used as one among several methods of actually teaching language…" (9).

Shiyab and Abdullateef (2001) further refer to studies by Harris (1978), Bolinger and Sears (1981), Faerch and Kasper (1980), Marton (1973), Bouton (1974), and to other studies in translation and bilingualism, which-all-cause all the arguments against the practice of translation in the F/2nd L setting, to fall one by one: especially that conscious learning of the foreign language, in fact, reduces 1st language interference, that mental translation (Harris's term is *natural translation*) is always there in the learning of a foreign language, that translation becomes a really helpful and useful exercise in contrastive linguistics at the levels of the grammar, phonology and lexis of two languages (e.g., Arabic and English), that translation helps learners to monitor code-switching and helps them to develop an “anti-interference immunity and resistance” (7), and that translation in teaching can be “like medicine, which, when administered in the right dose and way, has a curative effect…” (7).

So, assuming the usefulness and the necessity of (judicious) translation practice having now become obvious, the question remains of what type of translation? For what function? At what level? And through what medium?

The type is, of course, interlingual (as Shiyab and Abudllateef quote Andrzej), and the function is to expound grammar and teach words to the young and, to the advanced students, demonstrate phonological, semantic and grammatical patterns in both languages (Shiyab and Abudllateef amongst many others), besides the promotion of the four language skills (Popovic quoting Duff).

Stibbard (in Malmkjaer, ed.) proposes written translation as amenable to the development of critical, thoughtful reading, and spoken, to enhance the skills.

As Stibbard and Shiyab and Abudllateef, interalios, affirm, translation can also be used at the basic school level. I enlist, here, my experience with my 5th grade daughter who is often given exercises in one-sentence-bilingual translation. Not only is my daughter excited about them, and enthusiastic about their doing, but by time she understands there is no one-to-one equivalence between the properties of English and Arabic. In fact, the exercises have enhanced her English skills, especially those of reading and writing.

Stibbard (in Malmkjaer:71) refers to, what he calls, affective-humanistic approaches in TEFL as a justification for the use of translation. He says these approaches “emphasize the need to reduce anxiety in the early stages of language learning by allowing some use of the mother tongue”.

Now, drawing upon Widdowson’s ideas in his *Stylistics and the Teaching of Literature* (1975), chiefly chapters 4. (“The nature of literary communication”) and 5 (“Literature as subject and discipline”), and particularly the idea of literary communication as language use in usually unconventional grammar and lexis and the interpretation of this combination, I will outline my own experience in enlisting the help of the mother tongue in the teaching of English literature.

Firstly, I use translation to sharpen and deepen students’ understanding of, and let them feel, concepts and terminology in literary criticism, and literature, in general, e.g., *realism, naturalism, metaphor, metonymy, classicism, romanticism, structuralism, deconstruction, poetics, aesthetics, etc*. Needless to say, many of such have long been naturalized into Arabic.

Secondly, I use it to teach colloquialisms, especially the ugly, pun-loaded ones in Shakespeare’s plays, to help students understand the (English) idiomatic expressions, and to dramatize the extra-linguistic features of (English) tone, stress, intonation, accent, rhythm, etc., particularly in modern (English) drama. Without which help, the Arab student will be at a loss of what to make of all such and will never be able to discover their implications and (semantic) significations. In this context, Stibbard (73) suggests colloquialisms as one area of language that lends itself profitably to translation.

Thirdly, in my long experience of teaching Shakespeare, I have always found that students not only gain most but also get fondest, when they have come closest to visualizing who Shakespeare was, and is, as I sometimes use the mother tongue to teach his multi-layered fabric of imagery, his convoluted, unusually winding and inverted syntax, his (often) strangely knitted web of words, his vulgar, but wondrously meaningful, puns and, above all, his serious, troublesome, nagging, gnawing thoughts given the sublime but troublesome and crossword-puzzle form(s) sketched above: for how can one teach the syntax of Brutus's small oration, as one small example of Shakespeare's strange uses of syntax, rhetorical strategies and tone of Antony's oration, the histrionically grand Roman talk in Shakespeare's Roman plays, or, to be brief, the sublime in Shakespeare without succumbing to the temptation of referring to, and drawing upon, grand classic Arabic rhetoric and the sublime in thought in (especially classic) Arabic poetry?

In Shakespeare, there are verbatim renderings of lines in classic Arabic poetry, e.g., in "*Coriolanus*" III, iii, 185, and IV, i. 15, are almost word by word renderings of the Arabic.

- سأرحل عن بلاد أنت فيها،
- وفي الليلة الظلماء يفتقد البدر، respectively.

And one general intention (of the play) echoes

- أضاعوني وأي فتى أضاعوا.

"*The Tempest*" V, i, 27-28 are literal rendering of the Arabic sayings,

- العفو عند المقدرة، و
- الصلح سيد الأحكام

"Antony and Cleopatra" II, ii, 227 is a rephrasing of the Qur'anic verse (ونساؤكم حرث لكم).

I need not stress the frequent thematic and ideational resonances of the Qur'an and the Hadith, and the echoes and wholesale reworking of biblical matter and style, in Shakespeare. So, how can one effectively teach Shakespeare without making pedagogical capital of all this that is serious, worthy, enduring, sublime and eternal?

Again, Stibbard (Ibid:74), amongst others, comes to mind when he suggests culture-bound words, culture-loaded ideas and grammar patterns that differ in the two languages, as another language area in which translation can be gainfully used.

Fourthly, at the level of our MA Program in *Applied Linguistics and Translation*, moving often between English and Arabic is required (by the nature of the courses, and purpose, of the program), natural and helpful.

Lastly, a word of caution is needed. Translation is a legitimate pedagogical tool *if* used *properly* and *judiciously*. As Popvic (Ibid) says, it is not giving students a text and asking them to translate; rather the translation activities, uses, interferences are to be integrated into the language skills / properties / categories under exploration-all depending on the teaching moment, context and situation.

So, I would restrict my phraseology and say not translation (lest the word be misunderstood) but mother tongue, or L1, whose help should be cultivated in the learning / teaching of a foreign language and literature (in the Arab region, usually, English-both). For without understanding the linguistic and extra-linguistic media of communication, the thematic, ideational, intellectual and philosophical implications, significations or intentions, beneath them, will not be adequately gleaned. After all, the use of L1 in the learning and teaching of English language and literature does not purpose to train would-be translators but to help students understand the sign and make the correct interpretation.

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