THE FACT OF TRANSLATION IN LEARNING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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There surely is no denying that translation into and from the learner's L1 is a strikingly persistent and prominent feature of all foreign language learning, and not least of EFL. Pedagogically anathematized and outlawed for the greater part of this century (ever since the rise of the "direct method"), translation has nevertheless continued to play a vigorous, even dominant role in the actual process of L2 learning, as teachers know, classroom observers can see and hear, and anyone that introspects his or her own L2 learning can surely confirm. Clear objective evidence of his fact is provided by the long-continued and still continuing debate about the place of translation in L2 teaching/learning — an originally pedagogical argument[1] in which there has, in more recent years, been increasing linguistic involvement, with the findings of Contrastive Analysis being advanced in support of the use of translation,[2] and the "cognitive" doctrines of Transformational Grammar mustered against it.[3] However, the main question disputed in this argument (What part, if any, *should* translation play in L2 learning/teaching?) remains essentially a pedagogiical question. The truly linguistic question (Why *does* translation play such a big part in the L2 learning process?) receives far less attention. Yet, clarificaton of the second question is a prerequisite for any reasoned examination

[1] The two opposing sides in the pedagogical argument are clearly and forcefully summarized in Gatenby (1948) (against any use of translation) and Allen (1948) (in favour of the kind of translation advocated in the final part of this present article). For earlier, balanced views on this central, controversial issue, see Jespersen (1904) and Palmer (1917).

[2] E. g. Marton (1973a:148), Marton (1973b), and Di Pietro (1971).

[3] As, most strikingly, in Newmark and Reibel (1968:150–51), where it is asserted that the adult learner of L2 brings to the task the same cognitive-generative capability that enables the child to acquire his L1.

of the first. Moreover, translation of this kind is surely just as hard and significant a language fact as any other of the empirical data that are the object of linguistic analysis, and one that may throw its own special light on the nature and functioning of language.

In this paper, then, an attempt will be made to take a closer look at the *fact* (as distinct from the desirability) of translation in L2 learning, and at the various distinctions that require to be made for a proper appreciation of its significance in relation to L2 teaching.

1. A basic terminological confusion occurs with the key term "translation" itself. Applied, as it usually is, equally and indifferently to both the learner's and the teacher's recourse to the learner's L1, it blurs a qualitative distinction of far-reaching importance. For the teacher's recourse to translation is a deliberate *choice* of one out of a variety of teaching methods. Whereas (as will be shown in greater detail below) the learner does not *choose* to translate, since he has no alternative, his recourse to his L1 being the involuntary reflex of any language-speaker confronted with the communicative challenge of an unknown, or still largely unfamiliar, language. The stubborn persistence of translation in L2 learning is thus a fact about the learner, not the teacher, precisely because the L1 is an organic part of the former, but not of the latter: the teacher translates in response to someone else's need (the *learner's*), whereas the learner translates in response to his own need. Hence, the pedagogical argument about translation is essentially an argument about the teacher's use of translation; whereas the linguistic question (the one we are concerned with here) is focussed on the learner's reflex and unreflecting use of translation. It is therefore of the first importance for the distinction between these two very different meanings of "translation" in this context to be carefully observed. The translation we are concerned with here is *learner's translation*.

2. In order to do justice to the full extent of the learner's dependence on, and use of, his L1 in learning and L2, due notice must be taken of his covert, no less than of his overt, recourse ot translation in his attempts to understand L2 and express himself in it. Actually, only a relatively small part of a learner's use of translation appears as an *overt* deliberate attempt at matching L2 and L1 forms (especially lexical forms). Far more numerous are the learner's *covert* uses of translation from and into L1, especially in the form of syntactical and lexical transfers from L1 to L2. These occur frequently in the learner's oral utterances, but they are probably found in the greatest concentration in "free compositions", which are necessarily exercises in covert translation (see below p. 201). Indeed, such covert translation is the source of a great, if not the major, part of errors in L2 learning.[4] Hence, it is only

when the covert form of translation is properly taken into account that the full extent to which an L2 learner's efforts are pervaded by translation can be recognized.[5] Then, instead of being lightly dismissed as the unnecessary outcome of bad teaching or lazy learning (or both), translation can be seen for what it really is — the central fact of the whole learning process, at once the learner's chief aid in his endeavours to master the L2, and the main obstacle in his way to that mastery. Nor is it really surprising that this should be so, given what is now known about the interrelation of language and experience.

3. The persistence and all-pervasiveness of translation in L2 learning highlights what is probably the most vital distinction of all, one that has been latterly blurred, and even denied — especially by proponents of the "cognitive" theory of language learning. This is the distinction between L1 acquisition and L2 learning. The essence of this distinction, which lies in the qualitative difference between language as a vital feature of human development and language as an added human accomplishment, has been succinctly stated by Halliday: "... yet the most significant fact about the child's learning of his native language is that he has no language through which to learn it. Such an experience can never be repeated" (1968:95). What Halliday is drawing attention to here is the crucial fact that the acquisition of L1 qualitatively *changes the nature of the learning organism*, determining its maturation as a human being. Hence the claim that a given individual has the same "language learning capability" for L2 as for L1 (cf. Newmark and Reibel 1968:161), even if true, is irrelevant. The possession and fluent control of one's native language is not just one of various possible accomplishments (like being able to paint, or play the piano, or communicate in a foreign language) superadded to one's basic human qualities, but an essential component of being a particular kind of human individual. To refer to a pupil as an "X-speaking learner of English" (X being any other language) is wholly misleading in its implication of a distinction, hence a possible separation, between the pupil and his/her L1. Whereas, in fact, the two are as inextricably intertwined as, say, the pupil and his/her mind, the pupil's L1 being an integral, and indeed constitutive, part of his individual and collective personality. Hence, wherever the pupil is present, his language is necessarily present too. Moreover, by his gradual

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[4] Even those who contend that many of the supposedly L1-induced learners' errors are in fact to be explained intralingually, i.e. by wrong application of L2 rules (cf. Richards (1974)), still concede that a significant part of these errors remains *interlingual*. For recent re-assertions of this interlingual thesis, see Sheen (1980), and Dagut and Laufer (forthcoming).

[5] The very large amount of covert translation which occurs in the learner's *comprehension* of L2 is not easily accesible to an outside observer. But its existence is certain on general psycholinguistic grounds, as illustrated in the example given on p. 201 below.

acquisition of L1, the pupil has slowly built up for himself that complex symbolical representation of the outside "world" which becomes his chief means of organizing and controlling his own personal experience, and in particular of relating to other people; hence it is to this symbolical system that he immediately and intuitively refers in all his dealings with the "world", including any foreign language that he encounters. L2 is thus necessarily filtered through L1, like any other experience. In trying to acquire the new and as yet unfamiliar classificatory system of L2 the pupil naturally proceeds by relating it, as he relates every new experience, to the familiar system of his own language (whereas the child acquiring an L1 is acquiring its first, previously non-existent language system and has nothing but his actual experience to relate it to). And this relating of L2 to L1 (one symbolical system to another) can take no other form but intuitive translation. There simply is, for the school learner of L2, no "objective" non-linguistic world to which the symbols and structures of English can be directly related: everything of which he is aware, whether concrete entity or abstract relation, has already been named and structured for him in his L1, otherwise he would not be aware of it. Already at school age, the individual's world consists not of *objects*, but if *referents* (i.e. language constructs).

A small classroom example will illustrate the point.

Even a banal, seemingly simple, utterance of the kind sometimes used at the start of an EFL course, e.g. *I am a teacher*, is a complex language construct which can only be understood "linguistically", not "objectively" or "directly". For in the message conveyed here, language is the dominant factor. Thus even the word *teacher*, for all its apparently real and directly perceptible referent, is actually an instance of the classificatory power of the language unit "word" to crystallize complex abstract relations (involving social and professional functions) into a single concept. To understand this English word, the learner must therefore be able to relate it to an equivalent classificatory unit that he knows (i.e. one in his L1), since there is nothing else to which he *can* relate it: the physical object referred to is not (and cannot be) directly perceived as a "teacher", but is linguistically classified as such (and might equally have been classified as a "man", "student", "linguist", "doctor", etc., according to the speaker's choice). So that, if an equivalent lexical classification happened to be lacking in the learner's L1, the word would remain not understood by him, no matter how often and how vigorously the teacher pointed to himself as he made the statement, or how patiently and ingeniously he explained it in the L2.

All this is still clearer in the case of the other elements of the seemingly simple statement, *I am a teacher*. That the first person pronoun *I*, the predicator *am*, and the indefinite article *a* are all linguistic constructs surely need not be argued. How then is the learner to understand them — except by translation, there simply being no other possible way of moving from one highly abstract and condensed language symbolization to another? Even in the relatively small number of cases where ostension appears to work (as it obviously would not with *I*, *am*, *a*, and probably, though less immediately obviously, not with *teacher*) the success is indeed only apparent, since the object pointed to in fact merely serves as a trigger to evoke an equivalent language symbol in the learner's L1 (witness his frequently audible confirming translation). For the learner's world (like every language-speaker's) is, as already noted, so interpenetrated with language that it is impossible for him to separate his awareness of "things" from their classification in his L1. With the result that he can no more prevent his spontaneous (even if covert) reaction in that language to whatever is going on around him, including a lesson in English, than he can control his automatic reflexes.

This being so, proposals for blurring or even denying the qualitative difference between L1 acquisition and L2 learning would seem to derive more from determination to apply the "cognitive" doctrine of TG grammar to all language phenomena than from a strict regard for the actual data — including the data to be derived from the introspection favoured by TG theory, since it is hard to believe that linguists themselves learn an L2 (or L3, L4...) "cognitively", rather than by constant reference to their own L1 (i.e. comparatively). For the gulf separating the two processes is truly immense. It is inconceivable that any normal child should not acquire a first language together with, and indeed as the necessary basis of, its other specifically human faculties; whereas the knowledge of a second language is so far from being a necessary concomitant of humanity that it is not acquired at all by a very large number of human beings. Moreover, the acquiring organisms are, as already noted, qualitatively so different: in the case of L1, a still inarticulate creature "moving about in worlds not realized"[6]; in the case of L2, an articulate individual largely formed by language. Hence it is that only L2 needs to *be taught* (and may still not be learnt); whereas L1 is normally always *acquired* (even if, as throughout most of the world, it is not systemmatically taught at all). In so far, then, as language is an integral part of our humanity, we may be said to be in some sense "programmed" to acquire *a* language. But, as every teacher (not to mention every pupil) so well knows, the programming stops there; otherwise, it would be impossible to explain why the average schoolchild has to be virtually coerced into *trying* to learn an L2 (in contrast to the same child's earlier, even eager, acquisition of its L1), and why so much thought and effort over so many years have gone into devising methods (still of only limited effectiveness) to overcome his reluctance to learn, and to improve his chances of success.

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[6] Wordsworth, *Ode. Intimations of immortality 1.* 149.

This is the place to note how the blurring of the qualitative distinction between L1 acquisition and L2 learning is encouraged by a semantic stretching of the terms *bilingual* and *bilingualism*. Since the true bilingual — the person that *grows up and lives* in two different L1s, using them alternately as circumstances require[7] — does really acquire both his two languages in the same "direct" way, and largely independently of each other, the identification (explicit or implicit) of the goal of L2 teaching as "bilingualism" or "the creation of bilinguals"[8] appears to provide empirical grounds for equating the process of L2 learning with that of L1 acquisition. But this identification is, in fact, a hyperbole which, if taken literally, must either trivialize the concept of bilingualism, or foredoom most efforts at L2 learning/teaching to failure. In the first case, there will no longer be any clear terminological distinction to mark the qualitative difference between the true bilingual (whose two languages are equipollent L1s)[9] and even the most successful minority of school and adult learners (whose L2 always remains secondary to and retains various traces of, their L1), not to mention the much less successful majority. And, in the second case, the positing of a goal which is by definition unattainable would, if taken seriously, discourage both teachers and learners from even trying. That the overwhelming majority of L2 learners fall far short of true bilingualism is abundantly clear from their inability to use their L1 and L2 in effortless and appropriate alternation, and also from the fact that they are immediately (sometimes hilariously) recognized as foreigners by native--speakers of the L2 in question. However, attainment in L2 learning is in truth a graduated scale, not an an all-or-nothing affair, and valuable uses can be, and are, made of levels of attainment remote from bilingualism. Once this is borne in mind, it becomes clear that the failure to produce "bilinguals" does not in itself prove that the L2 teaching and learning have failed, but rather that the terms *bilingual* and *bilingualism* have been misused, and therefore that invalid conclusions about both the aims and the methods of L2 learning have been drawn from their misuse.

[7] Cf. Weinreich (1979:1): "The practice of alternately using two languages will be called BILINGUALISM, and the person involved BILINGUAL". Sheen (1980) accurately describes his very successful learners of L2 English as "near-bilinguals" — a terminological exactitude disregarded by advocates of L2 learning = L1 acquisition (see Note 8)

[8] E.g. Catford (1959:164): "The teaching of English or any language as a foreign language may be described as a process of creating bilinguals". Fishman (1966:121): "It is my contention that language teachers (all language teachers but particularly foreign language teachers) are producers of bilinguals". Both these scholars then proceed to heavily qualify their use of the term "bilingual", with (it seems to me) the trivializing effect noted below in the text.

[9] Cf. Weinreich (1979:77): "Some children learn two languages from the start; they may be said to have two mother tongues".

4. The confusion between L2 learning and bilingualism is facilitated by the blurring of another important distinction — that between learning an L2 in the actual environment in which it is spoken, and learning it in the environment of the learners' L1. Since language is the individual's essential means of controlling his environment and regulating his relations with other members of his community, it follows that the surest and most effective way of gaining communicative control of an L2 is having to live in it, every waking hour of every day, and to use it for the satisfaction of all one's needs, physical, mental and emotional, just as its native-speakers do. This is indeed the situation that comes nearest to reproducing the child's acquisition of its L1 — though here too the L2 learner's possession of an already existing L1 is a qualitatively differentiating factor, witness the correlation of the difficulty and incompleteness of L2 mastery, even in these circumstances, with increasing age: the more fully and exclusively habituated the use of L1, the harder the switch to L2, so that here too the "exposure" to L2 will often need to be supplemented by formal teaching, (as evidenced by the special language courses established, in some countries, for adult immigrants). However, the educational discussion of the teaching/learning of EFL normally pre-supposes that English is an L2 not just for the individual learner, but for the whole community in which he lives and learns. Otherwise, there would really be nothing to discuss, since acquiring English by living as a fully integrated part of a wholly English-speaking environment is an existential, rather than a strictly educational, process. What this shows is that, given the "right" conditions for language acquisition, TEFL is superfluous. But such conditions are precisely what does not, and cannot, exist in the EFL class, encapsulated as it is in the ambience of the learner's L1 and thus devoid of any existential raison d'être. Indeed, it is from the absence of the natural conditions for L2-*acquisition* (as distinct from L2-*learning*) that two of the EFL teacher's main difficulties arise: first, the learners' sense of the strained artificiality of what they are doing and their consequent, often irresistible, urge to relapse into the naturalness of their L1; and secondly (with younger learners, at least), their lack of motivation for making the effort required to master an instrument of communication for which they have no pressing need outside the classroom, and the lack of which is in no way felt in their language contacts with their fellow L1-speakers. Clearly, then, the way in which English may be picked up in its own cultural and social setting by people who use it as a survival tool, has no direct bearing on the problems of TEFL: the classroom cannot effectively be turned into an autonomous little piece of an English-speaking country for one hour a day, however hard gifted teachers may work to achieve this.[10] Blurring the distinc-

[10] A classroom lesson in EFL necessarily remains, at best, a piece of successful play-acting, rather than an existentially generated switch of communicative codes. Nor is it the teacher's fault that this is so.

tion between L2 learning in an L2 environment and L2 learning in an L1 environment (the TEFL situation) does not help the cause of TEFL, but it does give a false appearance of greater plausibility to the equation of L2 learning with L1 acquisition.

5. Finally, in any careful study of the fact of translation in L2 learning, there are two more distinctions to be clearly borne in mind: (a) between the various stages of the learning process, and (b) between the various ages of the learners.

(a) Since all learning takes the form of assimilating the unknown to the known, it is obvious that the learner's spontaneous reflex of translation will be strongest at the start of the learning process, when the L2 is an entirely unknown and strange "map" of experience to him. Indeed, as has been illustrated above (p. 201), without the aid of his L1 "map" (i.e. translation) the learner could not get started on his task at all. However, as his familiarity with the details of the new, L2 "map" grows, his ability to use its particular conventions in finding his way about the terrain of experience will naturally increase, while his dependence on the familiar L1 map correspondingly decreases. Thus he begins to translate less and "think" (i.e. respond spontaneously) in L2 more.[11] While it is very doubtful whether any L2 learner (as distinct from bilingual) can ever wholly free himself from the influence of his L1, and certain that the great majority fall far short of that, the learner's intuitive recourse to translation is clearly a constantly changing factor in the L2 learning process, and therefore presumably one that needs to be differently evaluated at different stages of that process.

(b) In most of the foregoing discussion, the typical L2 learning situation has been assumed to be that of the school classroom. With postschool and adult learners, however, there is a markedly different situation. While the *fact* of translation remains the same (the adult's need to translate being as great as the school pupil's and for the same reasons), there is now a significant difference in the learner's attitude to this fact, the adult's use of translation being more conscious and deliberate, the pupil's more intuitive and spontaneous. Furthermore, the adult's greater intellectual curiosity and powers of abstraction (in addition to his presumably greater motivation in learning L2) may well lead him to reflect on at least some of the relations between L1 and L2 revealed by translation, so that in addition to being an inevitable part of the L2 learning process, translation now also becomes a tool of contrastive analysis.

[11] With so little so for known about the actual nature of "thinking", it hardly seems helpful to talk in terms of "getting the pupil to think" in the foreign language. An operationally clearer aim is to get him to respond spontaneously in that language to situations occuring around him (cf. Di Pietro (1971:165)).

This too obviously has implications for teaching which it would be out of place to discuss here.

6. When these ambiguities and confusions obscuring the key terms "translation" and "L2 learning", have been removed, it can be seen that translation is not only a fact of L2 learning, but an absolutely inescapable fact, since the already acquired first language sets the stage, as it were, for the formal learning of any other. This being so, it is surely only natural to assume that there must be some way in which such a central feature of the learner's mental processes can be put to constructive use, instead if being ignored or repressed (ineffectually) as an unfortunate aberration. Indeed, there is something repugnant to common sense in the view that the unavoidable impact of L1 on the learning of L2 is so wholly harmful that L1 is actually the "enemy" of L2 learning (as it has been regarded by the more extreme exponents of the "direct method") and must be uncompromisingly treated as such.[12] This grossly one-sided attitude (encouraged, and perhaps partly justified, by the opposite excesses of the "grammar-and-translation" approach) takes no account at all of the vital facilitating effect of L1 on L2 learning. As noted above (sect. 3), it is only through his L1 that the learner can actually begin to penetrate the unknown symbolical system of L2: and his further progress is made that much the easier, the more similarities there are between the two languages.[13] (The full significance of the help afforded the learner by his L1 can perhaps be most strikingly (because negatively) seen in just those cases where his translation from L1 is blocked by the systematic incongruence of L1 and L2, i.e. where L2 has a syntactico-semantic system (e.g. the English aspect dichotomy of the verb) which is totally lacking in L1 (say, German). If such points of interlingual "lopsidedness", as is well known, present the learner with almost insuperable difficulties, this is precisely because his recourse here to L1 is unavailing, and he is therefore left without any means of comprehending the function of the

[12] A moderate expression of this view is found in Gatenby (1948:218), whereas Sanders (1976:72) "while not wishing to be fanatical about banishing the L1 from the classroom entirely", does imply that such an extraordinary feat, though perhaps not desirable, is certainly feasible. Quite apart from the inherent absurdity of such an approach (see section 3 above), this teatment of the L1 as a "bad habit" to be "eradicated" by appropriate pedagogical means is hardly calculated to enhance the ordinary pupil's desire to learn the L2. The extremes to which opposition to any translation can be, and sometimes has been, carried are illustrated by Bolitho (1976).

[13] It is true that similarities may also occasionally give rise to learning difficulties (as in the case of false cognates). But these are the exception rather than the rule. To generalize from them to the paradoxical conclusion that the more different an L2 is from the learner's L1 the easier it is to learn is to fly in the face of all language learning experience. For such a paradoxical (and therefore unconvincing) point of view, see Lee (1968:188).

distinction made in L2 (c.f. Duškova 1969:29). Hence his control of L2 at these points dissolves into confusion and guesswork. For what he is actually being required to do in such cases is to grasp a new concept — new to him, because it is not systemically symbolized in his own language — and nothing in L2 learning is harder than that (just as nothing in L2 teaching is harder than to find some way of imparting an understanding of, and "feel" for, such a new concept).

Translation, then, is potentially as much of an "ally" as an "enemy" in the process of L2 learning. It only becomes harmful, if allowed to usurp the whole purpose of the learning. And this can quite easily be prevented by keeping it in a subordinate role and having recourse to it only as an *aid* (not an *aim*) in the teaching of L2. The fact that L1 is always present in the learner's mind can be constructively exploited in two main ways: (1) to help eradicate the persistent errors arising from the numerous syntactic and lexical incongruences between L1 and L2, and (2) to provide immediately meaningful explanations of all those lexical items of L2 for which quick and clear explanation by either ostension or L2 paraphrase is not available (abstract words, such as *truth*, *subtle*, *remember*; function words, such as *but*, *or*, *both... and...*, *however*; idioms, such as *lose one's head*, *be out of the question*, *come to the point*). It must be remembered that in all such cases translation (or at least the attempt at translation) by the learner will take place in any case (cf. Palmer 1917:97). The choice, therefore, is not between translating and not translating, but between guiding the learner to make positive use of his natural recourse to L1 and leaving him at the mercy of its possible negative effects (Palmer 1917:99).

The restricted use of translation as an *aid* in the teaching of L2 harnesses the fact of learners' translation to the facilitation of L2 learning, without coming into conflict with the generally agreed communicative aim of L2 teaching. Indeed, paradoxical though it may sound, such translation is actually the best way, in the normal circumstances of formal learning (see sect. 4 above), to counter and reduce the influence of L1, by making the learner consciously aware of the nature of certain of his linguistic reflexes, and thus better able to control them (cf. Allen (1948:34; Harton (1973a:149), and Rivers (1968:153)). Spontaneous, confidently made L1-derived errors are persistently repeated, no matter how often the learner is merely shown and made to use the correct forms: as long as the relevant incongruence between L1 and L2 is not presented to his conscious mind through explanation and exercise, he continues to slip back automatically into the familiar, but in L2 terms wrong, grooves. The judicious, controlled use of translation thus actually helps to weaken the learner's dependence on his L1, and to bring him nearer to the required ability to exchange the forms and patterns of L1 for those of L2. Of course, it is perfectly true that the more often L2 is used in the learning

process, the more fluently it will be used, hence the basic validity of the "English through English" slogan. However, if blindly applied without due regard for the irrefragable fact of translation in L2 learning, this slogan may well produce, not fluent L2, but fluent pidgin.

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