



Teaching English Communicatively using Translation

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Abstract

Russian educational system, of a higher education in particular, inherited all the traditions of teaching languages from the Soviet Union, where the grammar-translation method was the prevailing one. This method included translation of texts on specific topics, making lists of vocabulary and explicit learning of grammar with a focus on reading skills to the disadvantage of speaking and listening. However, the wave of more communicative methods, such as the communicative approach and the direct method, has overrun the market of teaching English in Russia in recent years. One of the principles of these approaches is to avoid totally or at least to minimize the usage of students' mother tongue in class. Following this trend, more and more Russian teachers of English in search of their professional recognition on the international market take CELTA courses (designed for multilingual class purposes) that declare rejection of using translation and students' own language starting from the elementary level. The situation is amplified by the whole industry of TEFL, where authentic course books written presumably for native speaking teachers do not refer to translation. It can be explained by the fact that native speakers teaching English often have little or no command of their students' language. This leads to almost total exclusion of the native language from class. Russian non-native teachers in turn feel guilty about using translation as return back to out-of-date methods. However, recent studies [1,2,3] and our experience of teaching students proves that thoughtful using of mother tongue and translation in particular can be a real source of raising awareness of how language works. We are going to suggest a number of activities in the framework of lexical approach [4] for a monolingual class purposes (this is the typical situation not only for Russia). These activities focus on noticing chunks and collocations the skill of which is identified as an issue for students of all levels of proficiency. Translation here is not considered as the only part of teaching but as a fresh look at how it can be used to maximum effect in a combination with approaches aimed at immersion students in the language environment.

Translation as a method of teaching English as a foreign language is an essential part of grammar translation method that was broadly used in the USSR and then was inherited by Russian system of education. According to this approach, students translate written texts from one language into another. To be able to do so they learn vocabulary and grammar. It happens deductively through learning rules and examples and trying to apply them to other examples. The role of the mother tongue is crucial here as the only way of making the meaning of the target language clear for students is translating it into the students' native language. However, this approach has its apparent disadvantages. One of the most obvious one is the lack of attention to speaking and listening as even instructions are given in students' native language; even though acquiring these skills seems to be of primary importance in modern conditions.

With the advent of communicative techniques and the opportunity to use them due to authentic materials Russian teachers switched from grammar-translation method to a more progressive communicative one. Communicative method is focused on developing productive skills. In this respect, one of the principles of this approach is to avoid using students' mother tongue in class so that students are immersed into the language throughout the lesson with the help of authentic materials. Ideally, the learning situation can be presented as a group of monolingual or multilingual students taught by a native speaker who presumably might not have a good command of their students' mother tongue or cannot physically speak all the languages presented in the class. In such a situation, it is inevitable for the teacher to be able to convey the meaning through miming, demonstrating realias, gestures, etc. Otherwise, further teaching will fail. For such purposes, the courses such as CELTA are designed. Starting from the elementary level students do not listen to any other language in the class but English. In this context, it seems that students' own language is of no use as there is no common language in the class and the teacher often cannot fully participate in translation activities. Described example is an ideal situation whereas in the Russian reality most of the classes are monolingual with a Russian-speaking teacher. It means that Russian can be an adequate means of communication. However, Russian teachers willing to apply leading techniques in teaching their students and following the syllabus of their course books, which are written by native

speakers for native speakers to teach in a so-called ideal context, do not use Russian language at all. If they occasionally do, they feel guilty. It is exacerbated by the fact that non-native teachers may consider the fact that they are not native speakers as a disadvantage. They are eager to compensate the lack of natural and unconscious feeling of the language. Yet there is now clear evidence that non-native teachers are in a very advantageous position [5]. In addition, they can use their knowledge of the Russian language (in our case) as a real source of raising awareness of how English works. In the light of the foregoing, we have analyzed the most popular course books in the market of EFL, published by Oxford University Press [6], Cambridge University Press [7] and Pearson education limited [8] and came to a conclusion that there are almost no activities which take an advantage of exploiting students' mother tongue in order to master their acquisition of English. Most of these course books are designed in the framework of the communicative approach. Some references to using translation can be given in a Teacher's resource book, but still there are no activities with the focus on noticing how words work and comparison of different phenomena in two languages, which can be productive. However, there are some course books that are based on the lexical approach to teaching English, where the focus is shifted from learning grammar itself to mastering lexis, understanding and producing collocations and chunks, which leads to fluency - one of the criteria of language teaching efficiency.

One of the course books [9], which is written in the framework of the lexical approach, includes a variety of activities based on translation and making comparisons between English and a native language. All these activities are implemented into syllabuses of all levels from elementary to advance. Authors claim a teacher does not have to have a good command of their students' language in order to process these activities. Each unit of the book has a rubric "Language patterns" that consists of 5-6 sentences with the same lexical pattern, which students could meet in the text from this unit. All the sentences are examples of natural language. Students have to translate these sentences from English into their own language, then close the books and translate them vice versa into English. We find this activity very useful as students do not translate word by word but chunk by chunk. What is more, many utterances presented in this activity cannot be translated word by word. Therefore, students notice that it is impossible to express the same meaning using parallel constructions in different languages. Students need to bear in mind the whole chunk in English to express the idea they have in Russian. In one of the rubrics there is a set of sentences with the pattern *Did you hear/see/read about sth/sbd doing sth?*, for example, *Did you hear about Laura losing her job?* If students wanted to say the same in English they would probably say *Did you hear that Laura lost her job?* as in Russian there is the parallel expression. While students translate sentences from English into Russian, they notice the different construction, which sounds more natural. When all the translation is done, it is crucial to give students some time to compare original sentences with their versions and draw their attention to differences. Students can do it in pairs and then in an open class sharing their hesitations about correctness of their sentences. It is important to emphasize that it is not an exercise to practice students' memory, though it also works here, but to compare the way of expressing ideas in two different languages.

We adopted this activity and organized it with some variations. Each student gets a card with one of the sentences from the set (taken from the course book, but you can take any sentence according to the purpose of your particular class) written on it in English and has to translate the sentences and write it on another clean card. Some students can get a card with the same sentence on it. Then all cards rearranged among students so that each student has a card with a new sentence for them to translate back into English. In this case, students do not see the original sentence but they initially work with another sentence with the same pattern in it. Therefore, they can experiment with the language while translating. For follow-up activity, students can be combined into pairs or small groups with those who have the same cards discuss possible differences, to what extent their sentences in English are adequate to original ones. One more variation of this activity is to separate two stages of translation. For example, at the beginning of the lesson students translate from English into their own language and only at the end of the lesson or even in the beginning of the next lesson students translate their sentences back into English. Such time lag does not allow students to rely only on their memory but to do this task more consciously.

The same outcome can be achieved with the help of short articles or any other texts in English. It would be ideal to use texts with available translation made by a professional interpreter in order to compare results. In the Russian context, such texts can be taken from www.inosmi.ru where there are articles from foreign periodicals translated into Russian. Below each article there is a link on the original publication. Students should make a two-way translation following the example described above. Here they focus not on the pattern but work with the real text and have to be very careful with the choice of words and constructions as the whole meaning can be distorted if the word with wrong



connotations or subtleties of the meaning is used. As in the previous activity, students have to focus not on words but on chunks to translate. Such an activity can be done first in class with the emphasis on the stages and the way of noticing how the language works, then students can do it as homework with a later on discussion in class. Our observations show that this type of task really demonstrates how the language works and spots students' difficulties and pitfalls in terms of using appropriate vocabulary, including style and register, and grammar patterns.

Speaking about noticing the language and paying attention to collocations, it is also can be useful to suggest pairs of sentences from similar or different contexts where the same word should be translated into students' own language as two different words. In the following examples the word *earn* can be translated into Russian as two different words, as in the second example the word is used in the meaning of deserve. 1. *He doesn't earn much. He's still a junior in the firm.* 2. *After all the hard work, I think we've earned a break.* When we pay attention to it students can catch the difference better and expand their knowledge about the word getting one more meaning.

Such exercises, which make students switch from one language to another, can be easily implemented in the course of the lesson, which is lead in English, and will not be time-consuming. As the idea is, only to refer to translation but not to substitute natural communication that is prevailing. Such a thoughtful use of mother tongue can help students feel at ease and demonstrate them what resources are hidden in their own language and how they can appropriately use them to master their foreign language.

To sum up, the history of English Language teaching presents a spiral process when some methods are relegated to the background and substituted by more advanced, but over time, we return to underestimated possibilities and take the best of them. In a similar fashion, translation is not a step back to grammar-translation method. It is a fresh look at the way we can use translation in a classroom and a chance to see new potential in what we tend to avoid.

References

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