

The translation turn a communicative approach to translation in the language classroom

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Potential impact	medium
Timescale	ongoing
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What is it?

Translation, explicitly or implicitly, has been a constant presence in the teaching and learning of languages throughout the ages. It may therefore seem surprising that it should find a place in a report on innovative pedagogies. While translation has indeed been used for centuries for the purpose of language learning, there is no doubt that recent approaches in the area of language and translation pedagogy have helped re-conceptualise – and re-operationalise – translation in radically new ways.

For decades, translation had been identified with the grammar translation method, and decried as incompatible with a communicative approach. In the last two decades, however, we have seen a thorough re-examination of the role of translation in language teaching and learning. A range of factors have contributed to this trend, among them, the questioning of the monolingual principle in language pedagogy, extensive developments in the area of audiovisual translation, exciting innovations in the field of professional translation didactics,

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the huge success of translation-based digital platforms such as Duolingo, and, crucially, the introduction of the notion of mediation in the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR, 2001), later expanded in the *Companion volume* (CEFR, 2018).

A key feature of recent approaches is the emphasis on translation as a real-world communicative activity. As such, translation is seen not only – sometimes not even primarily – as a useful tool to enhance linguistic competence, but as a key skill (a language activity, to follow the CEFR) to be developed by any language learner, not just by those planning to enter careers as professional translators. Therefore, translation is increasingly regarded not just as a means, but also, crucially, as an end in itself in second language education. This shift has led some to suggest that we have entered a *translation turn* in language pedagogy.

The introduction of the notion of mediation in the CEFR has provided a basis for normalising the use of translation in language learning. Under the label of linguistic mediation, the CEFR includes all those language activities aimed at enabling communication between people when it is faced with obstacles that stand in its way (CEFR, 2001, p. 14). One of these possible obstacles is the absence of a common language. So, as described in the CEFR, mediation includes – but is not limited to – translation and interpreting. With its emphasis on the language learner as a social agent (action-oriented approach), the CEFR sees the development of plurilingual and pluricultural competence as a key objective of language learning.

Yet the CEFR in its 2001 edition did not quite follow through on its endorsement of mediation and translation in that it did not offer detailed descriptors to describe mediating competence at each of the levels (A1, A2, B1, etc.). This has been rectified in the *Companion volume with new descriptors*, published in 2018. As well as providing descriptors for mediation, the *Companion volume* places increased emphasis on the development of the learner's plurilingual competence, thus strengthening the position of translation within the CEFR.

Examples

We briefly outline here a few examples of translation tasks that aim to help learners improve their language skills through translation and develop their translation skills, particularly in regards to translation into the L2, but also more generally. They can be adapted to different educational contexts and levels of linguistic competence. The focus is on translation as a communicative activity. Where appropriate, skills are practised in an integrated manner, with opportunities to develop listening and oral skills, as well as writing and reading, and through the use of various media (written texts, films, plays, audios, images).

Task design is guided by a learner-centred approach, and pair work and group work are used to foster collaboration. Real-world translation tasks with clear briefs (e.g. translating a *TED Talk*) are combined with more controlled activities. Awareness-raising activities are also important to get learners to reflect on the translation process. For reasons of space, the following is a succinct list of suggested tasks, but they are envisaged as part of didactic sequences with scaffolding.

- Audiovisual translation activities: intralinguistic and interlinguistic subtitling, and dubbing of films; voiceover of documentaries; audio description for the blind and visually impaired (translation of images into words).
- Working with parallel texts in L1 and L2, using recipes, formal letters, contracts, etc. to identify text types, formulaic expressions, and stylistic features.
- Translating ads (wordplay, puns) and political speeches (rhetorical features) with a focus on persuasive language.
- Interpreting from L1 into L2: role-plays in which students carry out dialogues for real-life situations (e.g. hospital interpreter, tourist guide, etc.).

- Back-translation: students are given two translations of the same text and have to reconstruct, in pairs, the source text to identify issues to do with linguistic choices and stylistic nuance. They are then given the source text, and a discussion on translation strategies and techniques follows.
- Translating plays: focus on oral and pragmatic features, as well as the challenges of translating for the stage. Students translate a scene and film themselves acting it out.
- Translating comics and graphic novels: constraints of text and image, cultural references, phonic features (onomatopoeias, interjections). Working with poetry can also be productive in analysing phonic aspects (rhyme, alliteration).
- Group projects: collaborative translation using shared documents (discussing choices and negotiating a final version), translating for non-governmental organisations, etc.
- Individual portfolios: compiling own translations and reflecting on progress; using and assessing new technologies (linguistic corpora, glossaries, automatic translators, etc.).

Benefits

In today's multicultural and multilingual societies, the ability to mediate between speakers of different languages is an increasingly vital skill. Through translation-based activities, learners can:

- develop their plurilingual and pluricultural competences;
- enhance their contrastive awareness of both the source and target language;
- engage with a variety of media;

- develop awareness of genre and text type;
- sharpen their understanding of grammar;
- broaden their lexical knowledge;
- develop stylistic awareness;
- develop dictionary and documentation skills;
- acquire know-how in the use of translation technologies;
- enhance their creativity, critical thinking, and problem solving; and
- gain autonomy as learners.

Potential issues

With translation now being an element in the school language curriculum at General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), AS and A Level in the UK, opportunities open up to utilise its motivational and learning potential with young learners. However, implementation also poses significant challenges. The constraints imposed by current assessment methods and the lack of specific teacher training have often resulted in pedagogical and testing practices that hark back to the grammar translation method and risk doing more harm than good.

Beyond the UK secondary context, assessment presents a more general challenge. If we want to move away from outdated notions of translation as a near-mechanical transfer of meaning, we will need to explore more holistic evaluation methods that encourage a more realistic, creative, and socially relevant view of translation. A narrow focus on grammatical accuracy and dictionary knowledge may be indicated in certain contexts, but it must be balanced with more authentic translation activities.

A further challenge – but also an exciting opportunity – is posed by the increasing multilingual make-up of many classrooms throughout all stages of education. The fact that learners often do not share the same L1 and L2 means that traditional notions of directionality in translation pedagogy need to be rethought. At the same time, multilingual groups present the chance to introduce new classroom dynamics that can be empowering and enriching for learners.

Looking to the future

While there is now growing consensus favouring the use of translation for language learning, much work remains to be done on the design and implementation of translation-based activities in the classroom, as well as on assessment.

The focus on plurilingual competence in the CEFR and in the field more generally has been a factor in the reinstatement of translation. At the same time, however, if translation is to deploy its full potential in this regard, researchers and practitioners are going to have to think creatively and adapt to the demands of increasingly multilingual classrooms. We will no doubt see pedagogical proposals responding to this new paradigm in the coming months and years.

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Clipflair, a platform for foreign language learning through interactive revoicing and captioning of clips: <http://www.clipflair.net/>

PluriTAV, a learning platform for English, Spanish, and Catalan, based on a multilingual approach and aimed at teachers and students offers multimedia content and didactic sequences involving the use of audiovisual translation for the acquisition of plurilingual competence: <http://citrans.uv.es/pluritav/sd/?lang=en>

Language Learning with *Netflix*, a *Chrome* extension that allows viewers to watch films/ programmes with two subtitles on at the same time, so that they can visually pair translations with dialogue: <https://languagelearningwithnetflix.com/>

Two excellent initiatives that run creative translation workshops in schools:

Translators in schools: <http://translatorsinschools.org/>

Shadow heroes: <https://shadowheroes.org/>



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