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**Translation as an Irreplaceable
Approach in Foreign Language
Teaching and Learning**

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Translation as an Irreplaceable Approach in Foreign Language Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

Since the late nineteenth-century Reform Movement, monolingual methodology has been one of the cardinal principles in the foreign language teaching classroom. There was a general consensus that translation should be avoided as far as possible. However, the value of translation as an approach to foreign language teaching and learning is being rediscovered in addition to its effectiveness in explaining new words and grammar points, while the defective aspect of the communicative language teaching methods begin to manifest itself. On the basis the empirical study, the author finds that due to the lack of comparison between L1 and L2, monolingual methodology tends to cause the defective communicative competence characterized by the ineptitude of converting source langue information into target language such as the generalized way in description of their own culture, producing unconventional logic texture and so on. The thesis tries to explore the factors and the psychological mechanisms that may lead to the defective communicative competence, and holds that unbalanced input and absence of translation as the means of teaching and learning are two main causes; governed by the natural inclination 'to focus on content, not on form', L2 learners tend to resort to the strategy of avoidance when they are unable to understand or describe their own world in target language. The role of translation as an irreplaceable approach in foreign language teaching and learning is also explored in detail in the thesis. Its merits mainly lie in that translation into and out of the foreign language requires accurate understanding of the target language and obliges L2 learners to make cross-culture comparison in which process the strategy of avoidance will be excluded; translation can also involve foreign language teaching in a broader social framework which will eventually promote the L2 learners' communicative competence.

Keywords: TESOL; Translation

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Introduction

Since the late nineteenth-century Reform Movement, with the method of grammar-translation being expelled, monolingual methodology has been one of the cardinal principles in the foreign language teaching classroom (Richards et al., 1992). There is a general consensus that translation should be avoided as far as possible, since “it could lead to the formation of ‘cross associations’ and hinder the development of the foreign language (Howatt, 1984)”. On retrospection, the conclusion above may be too hasty and partial. Admittedly, the obsession of grammar-translation method with the accuracy in translation may lead to the producing of awkward sentences and frustration in foreign language study especially for young school children. However, for the advanced foreign language learner, the value of translation counts more, since it brings many advantages such as the comparison of language forms and cultural concepts between two languages. More and more educators argue for the significance of translation as an approach to foreign language teaching and learning in addition to its effectiveness in explaining new words and grammar points; while in the mean time, the defective aspects of the communicative language teaching methods begin to manifest themselves, such as the ineptitude of converting source language information into target language and so on. The paper tries to examine the defects of monolingual methodology and its negative effects on the FL learners in terms of psychological mechanisms, and promote the adoption of translation as a beneficial way of teaching and learning.

Defects of Monolingual Methodology

Although it is an undeniable fact that monolingual methodology brings FL learners into closer contact with the real foreign language they are learning and helps build up learners’ confidence to use the language, its defects, upon hindsight, are also noticeable and deserve researches.

Despite the various teaching methods arising after Reform Movement, monolingual principle remains as the bedrock. The methodology requires total immersion in native-speaking environments including the native or near-native teachers, the textbook in the original and monolingual classroom communication (Howatt, 1984). Upon analysis, all the requirements bring pros and cons.

First, as for the demand for the native or near-native teachers, it is almost impractical in most developing countries. The teachers with varying proficiency level are all expected to communicate with students in foreign languages will inevitably boost the prevalence of the Pidgin language.

Second, though the teaching materials are warmly welcomed by FL learners, they contain very little information describing the local culture where the learners live, which naturally entails an unbalanced input. So it is a

common and also an absurd scene to see an EL learner fluent in discussing western cuisine totally at loss how to describe their home-made dishes.

Third, it is true that the requirement for monolingual communication urges learners to ‘use’ the language they are learning. However, without timely correction, once the awkward expressions employed by the learners get across, they would be fossilized in the vocabulary (Ellis, 1985).

Analysis of Psychological Mechanisms That Cause the Defects of Monolingual Methodology

The inadequate language input of the information about FL learners’ native culture and the performance of monolingual methodology in classroom will logically lead to the lack of a systematic, sufficient comparison between the learner’s native language and the foreign language they are learning. However, the FL learners’ social environment and native culture are unavoidable when they are tasked to use the target language to describe their own life. Therefore, most FL learners’ communicative competence in L2 is characterized by the ineptitude of converting source langue information into target language, such as stammering and excessive use of hypernyms.

The paper here tries to explore the psychological mechanisms that may cause the defects of monolingual methodology.

- a. Concerning information processing research in second language acquisition, Vanpatten (1990) proposed that meaning will take priority, which means that on most occasions, after extracting the meaning of the learning material, language forms are seldom left in the memory, let alone matching between L1 and L2 in terms of word formation, sentence structure, language culture and so on.

Taking the first year English majors as the subject, the writer of the paper conducted a reach on the ‘matching’ capacity between L1 and L2 over five years. The total number of subjects is about 400, all of whom have at least 8 years’ English learning experience (two years at primary school and 6 years at junior and senior school). The form of the test is a warming-up exercise, in which the students are supposed to translate 14 Chinese phrases into English without consulting dictionaries.

Task. *Please Translate the Following Chinese Expressions into English.*

Chinese phrases	Reference Answers	Chinese phrases	Reference Answers
学龄儿童	school-ager	食指	Index finger / forefinger
文科学院	colleges of art	无名指	third / ring finger
专科学校	junior college	水槽	sink
学生成绩单	school transcript	落地灯	floor lamp
学历	record of formal schooling	切菜板	chopping board
基础科学	the fundamentals	抽油烟机	extractor
普及教育	universal education	公费生	state financed student

The semantic units of all the Chinese phrases above do not correspond to those of English. The result of the test shows that the average rate of accuracy (including correct paraphrasing) is very low, less than 15.7%. The reason can be attributed to three factors: one is that language forms of L1 and L2 are not corresponding with each other. For example, in Chinese, the literal translation of ‘水槽 (sink)’ is ‘water trough’, which, morphologically, is quite different from English; two, there is a large number of expressions specific to the L1 culture, for example, in Chinese, ‘食指 (index finger)’ means the most helpful finger at meal; Three is that most learners’ English is still not good enough to express themselves in a roundabout way. In general, there is no automatic matching between L1 and L2 in terms of language expressions.

b. In order to make up for the defective communicative capacity in the respect their own culture in target language, FL learners have to resort to the strategy of avoidance (Schachter, 1974), i.e. adopting simpler or circumlocutious way of expression, using hypernyms, or borrowing patterns from the mother tongue.

The Necessity of Translation in Foreign Language Teaching and Learning

If more consideration had been given the application of translation in language teaching and learning, translation would not have been expelled so absolutely with all its merits. Now more and more TESOL teachers are taking a happy medium between two extremes. The paper here is to clarify the necessity of translation in foreign language teaching and learning so as to rationalize our intuition and eliminate arbitrariness in TESOL practice.

a. The process of translation into and out of the foreign language requires accurate understanding of the meaning conveyed by language forms first, which is challenging in itself. Taking Chinese-English translation as an example, since the connection between clauses of Chinese is featured by parataxis, translating from Chinese

to English requires the clarifying the logic relation between clauses by adding proper form signs. Besides, in any language there exist a large number of 'cultural words' and unique ways of expression. The task of translation obliges L2 learners to make cross-culture comparison in which process the matching between two languages will be built up and the capacity of paraphrasing strengthened.

b. Translation may involve foreign language teaching in a broader social framework which includes both the target language culture and the learners' native culture; hence, FL learners' communicative competence in L2 will be greatly promoted, and the language they are learning will become a tool to link two kinds of culture in a real sense.

c. At the preliminary level, using translation as an approach in the foreign language teaching and learning should focus on the translation from the target language to learners' mother tongue, which is comparably simpler and avoids the production of awkward expressions. Translation forces FL learners to realize the different ways of expression of the two languages; at the advanced level, more emphasis should be placed on the translation from learners' mother tongue to the target language. In the process the advanced learners would try to make use of what they have learned to get their meaning across, which will certainly benefit their capacity of 'expressing' themselves.

Conclusion

The value of translation as an irreplaceable approach in foreign language teaching and learning is being recognized by foreign language teachers. Its major advantage lies in helping foreign language learners express their own culture. In addition, translation forces learners to deal with any material they are tasked to; in contrast, writing allows high degree of arbitrariness. Translation is also a comprehensive task requiring the skills of reading, writing and manipulating communicative strategies (Skehan, 1998). Therefore, involving translation in TESOL is strongly recommended by the paper.

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