

Translation in English Language Teaching in Japan

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Introduction

Since the introduction of communicative language teaching into English language classrooms in Japan, translation has generally been thought of as an obstacle to the smooth progress of students' language learning and the proper functioning of classrooms. It has sometimes even been looked on as a villain who has to be driven out of the classroom by all possible means but is persistently staying there or keeps coming back. Moreover, the traditional Japanese method of teaching English through translation combined with parsing and construing, quite often (mis)translated as 'grammar-translation' and thereby confused with the Western Grammar-Translation Method, has been a target of international criticism in the academic field of English language teaching. However, considering that many successful Japanese learners of English have gone through the process of learning English through this method, which is quite often called *yakudoku* (literally 'translational reading'), and that many good teachers of English have used translation fairly successfully in some part of their teaching practice, we cannot or should not simply dismiss their success as entirely exceptional or argue that they might definitely have done better without translation.

In 2009, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology issued the revised official guidelines for senior high school education (to be implemented in 2013), putting forward an English-Only policy in English language teaching and thereby causing many (mostly Japanese) teachers of English to reflect upon what they were going to lose. In 2010, Guy Cook, Professor at the Open University in Britain and Chair of the

British Association for Applied Linguistics, published *Translation in Language Teaching*, arguably the first substantial book written on the effective use of translation in the language classroom. In 2011, Sugawara Katsuya, Professor of Comparative Literature and former Head of the Department of English Language at the University of Tokyo, published a book entitled *Eigo to Nihongo no Aida* [Between English and Japanese], warning against the growing propensity of English education in Japan to disparage those kinds of formalistic training, including translation, designed to provide students with bilingual and metalinguistic skills in reading and writing. In this context of reconsideration of translation in language teaching, it will be worthwhile to take a renewed look at it to see whether it is really a ‘villain’ or rather a ‘good bad boy’ who should be allowed a humble place in the classroom.

In this paper I will defend translation against the academic and administrative campaign to drive it out of the classroom, but let me hasten to make it clear at the beginning that I am not suggesting in any way that all English teachers, including those teachers who are efficiently conducting their English classrooms all in English, should use translation as some part or other of their classroom practice. There is nothing wrong about a teacher of English conducting his or her classes without translation as long as they are well managed and productive. I am not objecting to conducting classroom activities translation-free, nor is it wise or even realistic to bring it into mixed language classes where students speak different languages. The rather modest suggestion that I am going to make in this paper will be that translation has a role to play in ELT in Japan and that teachers who believe in its merits and are actually using it in their classes should not feel guilty for doing so, here again as long as the classes are well managed and productive.

The Grammar-Translation Method and *Yakudoku*

One of the deep-seated misunderstandings about English education in Japan is that many Japanese teachers of English are still using the ‘Grammar-Translation Method’, which has long been outmoded in the West. The Grammar-Translation Method (GTM), or just ‘Grammar Translation’ as it is often called, origi-

nated in the method of teaching Ancient Greek and Latin, though ‘the idea [. . .] as a defined approach to language teaching only emerged in the late eighteenth century’ (Hall, 2011: 81), thereafter finding its way into the teaching of modern languages in Europe. It is characterized by ‘the explicit teaching of grammar rules and the use of translation exercises’ (Lightbown and Spada, 2010: 200) ‘in isolation from texts’ (Howatt, 2004: 151), deductive instruction (Hall, 2011: 81; Richards and Rodgers, 2001: 6), and the use of ‘isolated invented sentences’ (Cook, 2010: 14) presented in a synthetic, grammatical syllabus (Johnson and Johnson, eds., 1998: 153; Cook, 2010: 10).

Below is one of the exercises from *The Penguin Russian Course* (Fennell, 1961) which Cook (ibid.: 11–13) introduces as an example of a grammar-translation exercise:

Translate into Russian:

- (1) The house is here.
- (2) The bridge is there.
- (3) Here is a house.
- (4) Here is a bridge.
- (5) Here is a lamp, a chair, a table.

...

Japanese teachers of English will instantly notice that, though this may remind them of the old-fashioned method of Japanese-English or English-Japanese translation, it is totally different from what has been practiced in the name of *yakudoku*, which has often been mistranslated as ‘grammar-translation’ and confused with the GTM.

In an attempt to show the difference between the GTM and *yakudoku* Hiraga (2007: 56–92) draws attention to one of the pedagogical innovations in the late Meiji Era, where some English teachers introduced the idea of H. G. Ollendorff, the champion of the GTM, into ELT in Japan and published GTM textbooks, which included Toyama Masakazu’s *Monbushō Seisoku Eigo Dokuhon* [Education Ministry Regular English Reader] (1889). Here is one of the grammar-translation exercises printed in it:

May I go home?	Yes, you may go home.
May they go home?	Yes, they may go home.

May I rest?	Yes, you may rest.
May he study?	Yes, he may study.
May I play?	Yes, you may play.

...

What students were supposed to do with these sentences must have been to learn how to use the modal verb ‘may’ by translating word for word, just as Russian learners studied the use of the phrase ‘here is ...’ in the grammar-translation book mentioned earlier.

Interestingly, what Hiraga (*ibid.*) discovered was that this Japanese version of the GTM also fell into disuse right after its provisional implementation. Thus, the GTM became obsolete in Japan as well as in the West—even though this does not necessarily mean that the GTM is an absolute villain and has no potential for improvement.

Yakudoku, the traditional Japanese method of teaching and learning English through translation, which has been wrongly identified with the GTM, on the other hand, came from the old tradition of expounding Chinese passages and later Dutch and English passages in Japanese and can be more appropriately explained as a mixture of construing, parsing, interpretation and translation. Because of its original orientation, it uses language materials which are content-oriented, authentic (though the method can also be used for explaining inauthentic materials), and, most importantly, contextualized. Below is a transcription of a clip from my Open University of Japan language programme *Eigo no Kihon* (‘08) [The Basics of English, 2008] (for more information about the programme see Saitō and Ōhashi, 2008), in which I mainly use the parsing-interpretation method to explicate listening materials. In this particular clip, none other than Guy Cook as interviewee talks about the effective use of translation in language teaching:

Saito: それでは、いまのインタビューを三つの部分に区切って見ていきましょう。[Now, let’s divide this interview into three parts and take a look at each of them.]

Cook: Arguments in favour of it [translation] as a means of learning a language [are that] it encourages accuracy and it

encourages confidence. So, in the communicative language teaching approach, which didn't generally use translation, it's always possible for the student, who's coming to a bit of the language they know that they're not confident about, to just go around it and avoid it, and nobody would even realize that they've done that. OK. I think everybody who speaks a foreign language has this experience: 'I don't know how to say this, so I won't say it', right? But if you make people translate, you make them confront their difficulties, and you can see where those difficulties are, and you can then overcome them. So I think that's one very important thing. . . .

Saito: 外国語学習における翻訳の第一の効用に関するお話です。まず *Arguments in favour of it*、直訳すると「その味方をする議論」ということですね。in favour of 何々、「何々に味方して、何々に賛成の」という慣用句も覚えておいてください。で、ここでは *Arguments in favour of it*、「それ」、これはすなわち translation 「翻訳」のことを指していますが、「それを良しとする議論」ということになります。次の *as a means of learning a language* 「語学学習法としての」という意味で、直前の *it* を補足的に説明しています。means は「手段、方法」という意味の名詞で、s がついたまま単数複数どちらの形でも用いられますので注意してください。……

[In this part, he talks about the first merit of translation in language learning. 'Arguments in favour of it' literally means その味方をする議論. The phrase 'in favour of something', which can be paraphrased as 何々に味方して、何々に賛成の, is worth remembering. So, 'Arguments in favour of it', where 'it' [それ] refers to 'translation' [翻訳], means それを良しとする議論. The next phrase 'as a means of learning a language', meaning 語学学習法としての, gives an additional piece of information concerning the preceding 'it'. 'Means' is a noun which means 手段, 方法 and is used, you need to remember, as a singular or plural noun, always ending with 's'. In this context, the noun is singular, preceded by an indefinite article. . . .]

The parsing-interpretation (*yakudoku*) part of my programme is immediately followed by the replay of the original talk (though in the session where we used this particular clip, we did not

have enough time left to replay the interview) in such a way that my parsing-interpretation should work as pre-activity instruction whose aim is to help students to focus on listening comprehension rather than as a self-sufficient discourse analysis to be remembered. Although the main target for *yakudoku* has been reading materials, my example above possibly suggests that this method is flexible enough to serve the needs of various supplementary classroom activities.

In Defence of Translation

Differentiating *yakudoku* from the GTM, I am fully aware, does not make translation in ELT immune from other criticisms, one of which is that translation practice tends to end up producing Japanese texts, thereby only training students' skills in Japanese, not those in English.

This argument has been so strong as to make the no-translation policy almost an obsession in ELT in Japan and has led to the invention of a teaching method, which some may call innovative and others bizarre, in which students are given in advance a full translation of a target text they are to read. The point of this method is to have students understand the general content of the text in preparation for their class so that the main classroom activities can be completely translation-free. If properly used, this method may function as an antidote to old-fashioned translation-focused ELT, but, if giving a translation in advance becomes its own end, it can easily turn into a poison itself as there is no guaranteeing that students will only use the full translation in their pre-activity reading and will not compare it with the original English text word by word in preparation for the examination. It is also widely observed that students who have learned English by this method tend to take it for granted that they can get a full translation of their reading material in advance of their class and ask their teacher for one even after going on to higher levels of education. Invented as an antidote to in-class translation, it is now paradoxically proving to be a much worse form of translation than one-time parsing-translation.

If having a translation as the end product is a problem, we can avoid it by providing many follow-up activities—reading the text aloud, comprehension check, discussing the content of

the text in English, essay writing, relevant task-based activities, etc.—after making sure of students’ understanding of the target English text through translation, construing, or parsing in Japanese. Translation is just a way of making sure—importantly only in the classroom (meaning that it should not be part of their self-learning activities)—that students have rightly understood the target text or discourse.

Although translation is not the only way of checking students’ understanding of a target text or discourse, many Japanese teachers of English contend that it is one of the best ways to do so in a classroom where the teacher speaks the same language as his/her students. I myself have tried many different ways of teaching English in terms of instruction language—conducting classes all in Japanese, all in English, or half in English and half in Japanese, switching between the two languages depending on the responses of my students—and have come to subscribe to the opinion that what deserves special mention about translation is its trouble-shooting function in the classroom. When one finds students having difficulty in understanding a certain English passage or piece of discourse, asking them in English what the problem is sometimes does not work, because their English is not good enough to describe it, or because they equivocate, picking out some fragments of the words and phrases in the original text or discourse, or because they simply are inarticulate or silent. On such occasions translation quite often helps Japanese teachers of English to locate the problem: sometimes students have misunderstood the sentence structures, sometimes they have misunderstood the logic, or sometimes they have simply misunderstood the meaning of one tiny word. It is perfectly legitimate for English-speaking teachers to use their own monolingual trouble-shooting strategies, as they are able to, but for Japanese teachers of English, if they are to make use of their bilingual teaching skills to the full, translation is one of the most effective teaching strategies to ensure their students’ understanding of what is being taught.

Translation as an Extension of L1 Instruction

Another argument against using translation in the classroom is that translation is a waste of time because the best practice for

using English is to use English; why waste some of the precious time of your class disturbing your students' minds with Japanese. On the face of it, this seems to be a perfectly sound argument. The best practice for using English no doubt is to use English; the best practice for speaking English is to speak as much English as possible, the best practice for reading English is to read as much English as it is without translating it word for word, and the best practice for writing English is to write as many English sentences as possible—but *only if* the students have reached an advanced level where they do not need any L1 support in using and understanding English.

However, considering the wide linguistic difference between English and Japanese in terms of graphology, phonology, phonetics, vocabulary, syntax, semantics, and discursal structures as well as the almost universal fact of language learning that '[l]earners will always relate the new language to their own, even if only in their own minds' (Cook, 2010: 49), it is quite often the case that translation or at least instruction in Japanese greatly facilitates their understanding of English. In arguing for the use of L1, or 'own-language' in his terminology, in the classroom, Cook (ibid.: 47) also refers to the study of teachers of Japanese in a British secondary school by Hobbs et al. (in press) who found 'a much more positive attitude towards own-language use among the non-native speaker teachers [of Japanese] than the native speaker ones.' This study suggests, taken together with the traditional approach to English language teaching in Japan, that non-native-speaker teachers on either end of the wide gap between English and Japanese tend to support the idea of L1 use in the classroom, presumably based on their experiences of moving between them in their respective language learning and teaching.

Some teachers and researchers make a clear distinction between instruction in L1 and translation, approving of the former and disapproving of the latter, but it is extremely difficult, though possible in theory, to avoid translating any word, phrase or sentence in the target discourse while giving instruction in L1. The policy I would suggest here is that translation is just an extension of elementary L1 instruction, not a specialized skill, as I will argue in the next section; it should function as a scaffolding that the teacher puts up to build up his/her students' ability to

use English and takes down when the solid framework of the building has been set up. The difficult question which I do not have enough evidence to answer at this point is to what extent teachers should use the scaffolding and at which point they should take it down. The general principle should be: the more advanced, the less translation, and *vice versa*.

Translation as a Pedagogical Tool and Translation as a Communicative Strategy

Another argument that teachers of the monolingual persuasion tend to make against translation is that it is a specialized skill that only would-be translators should acquire. True, it can mean that if we define it narrowly as a literary rendering of a source text written in one language into a text written in another, which can be read as an independent, self-sufficient piece of writing. However, in the Japanese tradition translation in language teaching is a process of explaining the words, phrases, and structures of a target text using your L1 and of understanding what it means as a whole. The wording used in it does not have to be beautiful, literary, or self-sufficient. The aim of translation in ELT again is to make sure of students' understanding of a target text or discourse as a basis for further study.

Translation is not only a useful pedagogical tool but also an unavoidable communicative strategy if Japanese learners of English are to use the language in a more productive fashion in international communication. In production-oriented English education, learners are encouraged to talk about their society, culture, and, above all, about themselves. When Japanese learners of English try to talk about themselves in English, they are constantly and inevitably translating Japanese into English. If they try to talk in English about how they grew up, for example, they will dig into their memories, searching for scenes from childhood, where their parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters, and friends are in most cases speaking in Japanese, and will constantly translate what those people said into English. This is also the case when Japanese students write essays in English about their hobbies, families, friends, or whatever concerns their experiences in Japan. It is quite unlikely that translation works productively only in one direction—from Japanese to English—but

not the other way round, and if translation is a useful communicative strategy, there is no reason why it should be avoided in English classrooms.

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