

## A Reassessment of Translation in the Second Language Classroom

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### Abstract

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, translation was practically removed from recommended second language teaching approaches to give way to communicative language teaching. However, lately the reasons for this have been questioned and found lacking, and there has been a new surge to include translation activities in the language classroom. This article addresses the reasons behind using translation in the language classroom and applies this information to give helpful activities for language teachers who want to include translation in their classrooms.

### Introduction

Recently there has been a change of attitude among academics involving the use of students' L1 in the language classroom. With the 2010 publication of *Translation in Language Teaching*, Guy Cook highlighted the educational events and attitudes that have led up to negative views of translation and described this situation in these words,

Translation in language teaching has been treated as a pariah in almost all the fashionable high-profile language teaching theories of the 20<sup>th</sup> century-so much so that towards the end of that century, other than at university level, it was no longer discussed in the academic literature as a serious candidate for aiding the learning of a new language. (p. xv)

It is important to understand that when the word 'translation' is used throughout this introduction and in the translation in language teaching (TILT) activities that follow, it does not exclusively mean a literary translation. The reassessment of translation begins with the re-analysis of what translation is. Vygostky provides a fruitful definition of translation "as a mediator between the world of objects and the new language" (p. 161). This conceptualization of translation 'as a mediator' provides the flexibility needed for translation in the language classroom and includes activities ranging from intralingual translation, such as same language summaries or a translation of a Shakespearean poem into current day English, interlanguage translations, and translations from students' L1 into their L2.



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For the most part in the educational atmosphere described by Cook, there have been four basic reasons which have been used to discredit translation. Philip Kerr (2016) listed them as the following:

1. Translation is less important than the four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking, and, in any case, is not a useful skill for most learners to acquire.
2. Time spent using the students' first language is time lost using English.
3. Learners need to learn to think in English and first language use discourages them from doing so.
4. First language use encourages the false belief that there is a word-for-word equivalence between languages, and therefore leads to language interference problems. (pp. 2-3)

Upon closer examination, these discrediting points do not stand up. While point one suggests that translation 'is not a useful skill for most learners to acquire,' this could not be further from the truth. In the process of learning a L2, the learner is building off of what they already know in their L1. Essentially, as a beginning learner works on the four 'principal' skills of language, translation is there at all times mediating and acting as a bridge between the languages as well as between levels of the target language and therefore cannot be less important. Point number two does not take into consideration attentive use of L1 for explanation purposes, the time lost by students who fail to understand L2 directions, and the extra time spent on explaining a certain concept in the L2 when the students already have this concept in their L1. Point number three would suggest that different languages are compartmentalized into different spaces in the human brain. François Grosjean (1989) wrote about this false assumption in "Neurolinguists, beware! The bilingual is not two monolinguals in one person." He argued that learners do not compartmentalize the L1 in a separate place from the L2 that they are learning; both are stored in the same area and will always be connected. Translation exercises help strengthen these connections so that learners develop the ability to work from the L1 to L2 or vice versa. Point number four or the worry of L1 interference does not recognize the benefits of translation in comparative analysis between languages, for example when explaining the concept of 'false friends' to help students avoid errors.

### **Translation As the Fifth Language Competency**

The evidence actually points towards exploiting the benefits of using translation in the language classroom and considering translation as both a language teaching tool and an end goal. Translation as an end focuses on making translation the fifth language competency. One desired outcome of this skill for students would be that they be able translate from their L1 into the L2. Through the use of specifically designed translation materials, teachers can both develop translation competency and aid the development of other L2 competencies. Translation as a fifth skill does not end there but should also aim to develop the ability to translate back to the L1 (from the L2) and by doing so show full comprehension of the L2 with a heightened sense of awareness of the differences that exist between the languages. Always with the end goal of the learner being able to express ideas freely in their L2, this competency encourages a high level of understanding, communicative competence, language accuracy, clarity, and flexibility.

### Practical Teaching Applications

In the conclusion of *Translation in Language Teaching*, Guy Cook (2010) stated, “If the benefits of TILT were to be recognized in theory as well as in practice by those in positions of power and influence as well as by rank-and-file teachers... new materials would need to be written” (p. 156). In response to this call, we will next offer three lesson plans with sample activities that implement TILT. Each activity is for a different student level and uses TILT differently: one uses translation of an English poem into the students’ L1 and has them translate it back into English; another uses translation of newspaper headlines in the student’s L1 to guide students to compare these headlines to the newspaper headlines in English on the same day; and the final activity raises students’ pragmatic awareness about the speech act of apologizing by comparing how the students would apologize in their own language with how it is commonly done in English.

In closing, it is important to remember the guidelines for translation activities put forth by Nolasco and Arthur (1995), as cited by Inga Dagiliené (2012):

1. Language is used for a purpose.
  2. Translation activities create a desire for communication.
  3. Translation activities encourage students to be creative and contribute their ideas.
  4. Students are focused on what they are saying, rather than how they are saying it.
  5. Students work independently of the teacher.
  6. Students determine what to say or write.
- Moreover, translation activities need not be used in isolation, but should be included in an inherent part of the language learning course. (p. 125).

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## Back Translation for Cultural and Linguistic Awareness Raising

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### Preamble

**Overview:** Students will be provided with a short selection of text originally written in the students' L1 but professionally translated into English. Without looking at the original text, students will translate the text from English back into the original language of the text, which will also be the students' L1. Afterwards, students will compare their version of the text with the original version. In groups, students may also discuss how their L1(s) differ from English and why the English translation may have led them to retranslate it in a way different from the original.

**Target student level:** High-school aged students and older; the difficulty of translation can be adjusted to the students' level of English proficiency.

**Topic:** Culture

**Goals:** (a) To notice L1 meaning as it has been expressed in English, (b) to notice the gap between students' own translations from English and the original text in the students' L1, (c) to practice asking and answering questions about students' languages in relation to English based on how their translations differ from the original and (d) to share an experience of their home culture with other students.

**Materials needed:** Professional English translations of a text from students' L1 and the original texts authored in students' L1.

### Activities

#### Activity 1: Warm-up

1. *Without telling students that the text is a translation*, present a short paragraph of an English text which has been professionally translated from the students' L1. Ask the students to summarize or restate it in their L1 individually or with a partner who speaks the same L1.
2. In groups, ask students to share if they recognize any elements of their L1 culture in the text. Sharing can be done in the L1 or in English.



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**Activity 2: Translating**

1. Ask students to translate the text, to the best of their ability, into their L1.
2. Encourage students to use any resource available—bilingual dictionaries, Google Translate, each other, and the teacher.
3. Tell students to work on a literal translation (basic and easier) then a more literary one (higher level).
4. Answer questions about specific words, phrases or correct grammar, and ask the students to try to understand the voice or tone of the text in English and to translate it into their L1 with a similar voice or tone.

**Activity 3: Comparing**

1. Pass out copies of the original version.
2. Ask students to highlight the differences between their versions and the model version.
3. Put students in pairs to (a) exchange their translations along with the originals and (b) ask each other questions about how and why their versions differ from the original.

**Activity 4: Closing**

1. Ask students whether they like their translations better than the original and why, or whether they like the original better than their translations and why.
2. Make a class list of all the new words everybody learned.
3. Discuss grammatical features everybody learned or noticed.

**Examples of Language-Specific Activities**

**For Spanish Learners of English**

1. Pass out the English translation *without saying it is a translation*.  
To take the wrong road  
is to arrive at the snow  
is to arrive at the snow  
and to arrive at the snow  
is to get down on all fours for twenty centuries and eat the  
grasses of the cemeteries
2. Tell students “Taking the wrong road” is a *metaphor* for making mistakes and “arriving in the snow” is a *metaphor* for dying. Ask students to say what they think about these metaphors. Ask students, “Are they right, wrong, good or bad? How would you say this poem in Spanish? Would you use different metaphors?”
3. After students have come up with their own translations, show them the original text, *Pequeno Poema Infinito por Lorca*:  
Equivocar el camino  
es llegar a la nieve  
y llegar a la nieve  
es pacer durante veinte siglos las hierbas de los cementerios.

Ask students, “The translator said one line twice. Does this make it a bad translation? How does your translation from English into Spanish compare with the original poem? Can you explain, in English, why you translated the way you did?”

4. Ask students, “People sometimes say Spanish speaking artists are very passionate about death. Do you agree? Why or why not? Do you think it is polite or impolite to talk about death? If you remembered this poem at a birthday party, would you say it? If you remembered it at a funeral, would you say it?”
5. Do you like your translation or the original better? Why?

Text source: Bly, Robert (1973). *Selected Poems Lorca and Jimenez* [translation]

### For Japanese Learners of English

1. Here is writing from a popular children’s book:  
*An elephant makes a big poop. A mouse makes a tiny poop. A one hump camel makes a one-hump poop. A two-hump camel makes a two-hump poop. Only kidding. Fish poop. And so do birds. And bugs do too. Different animals make different kinds of poop. Different shapes. Different colors. Even different smells.*
2. Do you think this is a good children’s story? What country do think this this story might come from? Everybody poops, but does everybody talk about poop openly? Why or why not? Can you write the meaning of these sentences into Japanese?
3. Here is the original text from a famous Japanese children’s author, Taro Gomi.  
おおきい ぞうは おおきい うんち ちいさい ねずみは ちいさい うんち。  
ひとこぶ らくだ ひとこぶ うんち。ふたこぶ らくだ ふたこぶ うんち。こ  
れはうそ。さかなも うんち。 とりも うんち。いるんな どうぶつ いるんな う  
んち。いるんな かたち。いるんな いろ。 いるんな におい。
4. Japanese does not have “A” before some words. Was it difficult to put what these words mean into Japanese? In English, we say “*Different* shapes, colors and smells.” But in Japanese, the author used the word *Many* (いるんな) instead of *Different* (ちがう). Why?

Text source: Gomi, T. (1993). *Everyone Poops*. Kane/Miller Book Publishers.

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## Newspaper Headlines Across Languages and Societies

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### Preamble

**Overview:** Students will look up the top five headlines of the international news section of a website of a prominent news media source of their home countries and translate them into English. Then, they will compare the differences and similarities with the top five headlines from local English media sources.

**Target student level:** High-intermediate or advanced

**Topic:** Current News

**Goals:** (a) To express L1 meaning in English, (b) to notice and discuss the differences of each media source using English, (c) to critically analyze the reasons behind the differences.

**Materials needed:** Online news or newspapers in the students' L1 and in English.

### Activities

#### Activity 1: Translating the headlines

- Provide the students with the worksheet.
- Ask students to use their internet devices (or classroom computer) and go to the website of a prominent news media source of their home countries, such as NHK, KBS, etc.
- Ask them to find the top five headlines of the international news section and write them down on the worksheet in their L1.
- Have students translate those headlines into English and write them down on the worksheet.

#### Activity 2: Comparing the headlines

(Pattern A: when all of the students share the same L1)

- Have students present their translated headlines in pairs and compare their translations.
- Draw attention back to the class as a whole. Present them with the top five headlines from the international news section of a local English media source, such as CNN, BBC, etc.



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- Have students compare the differences and similarities of the headlines that are reported in the L1 media source and the local English media source.
- Draw attention back to the class as a whole. Have each pair present their findings to the class.
- As a class, discuss and analyze the reasons behind the differences. Ask questions to facilitate the discussion, such as ‘Why do you think this headline is reported in one media and not in the other?’; ‘Do you think the choice of the headlines depends on cultural/political/geographical backgrounds?’

### **Activity 2: Comparing the headlines**

(Pattern B: when students have a different L1)

- Have students present their translated headlines in pairs and compare the similarities and differences of each L1 media source.
- Draw attention back to the class as a whole. Present students with the top five headlines from the international section of local English media sources, such as CNN, BBC, etc.
- Individually, students compare the differences and similarities of the headlines that are reported in the L1 media source and the local English media source.
- In pairs, students describe their findings to their partners.
- Draw attention back to the class as a whole. Have each student present her/his findings to the class.
- As a class, discuss and analyze the reasons behind the differences. Teacher will ask questions to facilitate the discussion, such as ‘Why do you think this headline is reported in one media source and not in the other?’; ‘Do you think the choice of the headlines depends on cultural/political/geographical backgrounds?’

**Worksheet**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Time: \_\_\_\_\_ Media: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Write down the top five headlines in your first language.

1	
2	
3	
4	
5	

2. Translate them into English.

1	
2	
3	
4	
5	

3. Discuss the similarities and differences of the headlines.

<u>Similarities</u>	<u>Differences</u>

4. What may be the reasons behind the differences?

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Reina Horton is an MA TESOL candidate at Hawaii Pacific University. She has taught Japanese in the US and is interested in using authentic materials in language teaching and facilitating students' critical explorations of social categories such as gender.

## **“Saying sorry isn’t easy!” Teaching Cross-Linguistic Pragmatics**

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### **Preamble**

**Overview:** This activity set exploits translation in the ELT classroom to increase students’ pragmatic competence. Translation was employed to lower students’ affective filter, encourage discussion, sharing, and reflection of similarities and differences between the students’ L1 and English.

**Target student level:** High-intermediate, adult (ESL context)

**Task:** Apologizing (can be applied to other speech acts)

**Goals:** To increase students’ pragmatic competence when apologizing in English

**Materials needed:** Worksheets

### **Activities**

#### **Activity 1: “I’m so so sorry!”**

- Step 1: Cut up Worksheet #1 into three sections so students can look at the scenario and then flip the paper over and look at the corresponding apology.
- Step 2: Break students up into pairs. If possible, put students together whose first language (L1) is the same.
- Step 3: Ask students to look at scenario #1 and discuss how they would apologize in their native language and how they would apologize in English. Encourage L1 use.
- Step 4: Invite students to share their L1 and English apology strategies with the class. Encourage reflection on the similarities and differences of their L1 and English.
- Step 5: After a sufficient number have shared, instruct students to flip their sheets over and examine the model apology.
- Step 6: On the board, write the usual steps of apologizing (which can be found on worksheet #2) encourage discussion and elicit differences between their L1 and English.
- Step 7: Have students go through the second and third scenarios from Worksheet #1.



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**Activity 2: A real apology!**

- Step 1: Encourage students to brainstorm realistic and personalized situations in which they might have to apologize in English.
- Step 2: Ask students to pick two situations and write a dialogue using the conversation strategies practiced today.
- Step 3: Circulate around the room in order to make sure all the language is appropriate.
- Step 4: If the class is willing, pairs can go up in front of the classroom and perform their dialogue.
- Step 5: As a class, pick one or two scenarios presented and review the steps for apologizing for that scenario. List the steps on the board. In order to highlight the pragmatic differences between languages, ask pairs to make a list highlighting cultural and linguistic differences when apologizing.
- Step 6: When all the pairs are finished, make a list of student observations on the board.

**Materials**

**Worksheet #1: I'm so so sorry!!!**

Situation: In a cafeteria, you accidentally bump into a friend who is holding a cup of hot coffee. The coffee spills all over your friend, burning his/her arm and getting his/her clothes all wet. Your friend shouts: "Ouch! Ouch!"

- 1. How would you apologize for this situation in your first language?
  - 2. How would you apologize for this situation in English?
  - 3. Are there any differences between your first language and English when apologizing for this situation?
- 

Situation: You made plans with your good friend, Nick, but you forgot to meet him!

- 1. How would you apologize for this situation in your first language?
  - 1. How would you apologize for this situation in English?
  - 2. Are there any differences between your first language and English when apologizing for this situation?
- 

Situation: You're over at Nick and Bianca's house for an awesome party, but you accidentally spill red wine all over their brand new couch!!!

- 1. How would you apologize for this situation in your first language?
  - 1. How would you apologize for this situation in English?
  - 2. Are there any differences between your first language and English when apologizing for this situation?
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## Worksheet #2: A real apology

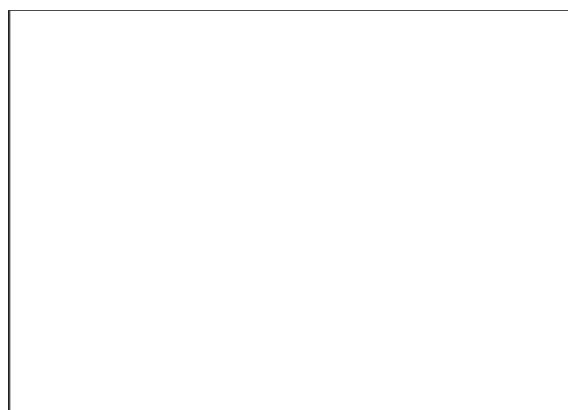
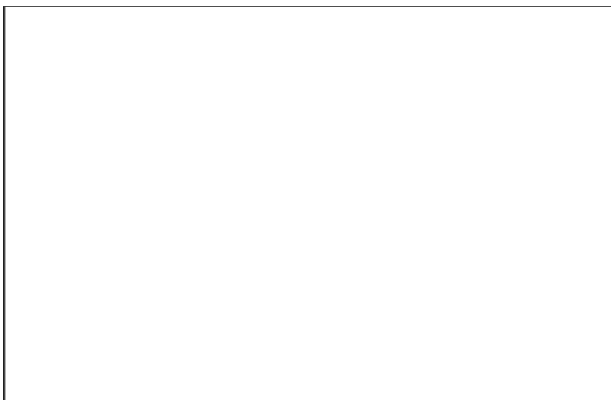
4 strategies Americans use when apologizing:

- a. Apologize!
  - In American English, the phrase “I apologize...” is usually used in writing. Phrases like “I’m so sorry,” and “I’m really sorry,” Are usually used in speaking.
- b. Take responsibility/explain what happened!
  - The highest level is saying something like, “It’s my fault. I should have tried harder” A lower level would involve saying that you failed in some way. For example, “I woke up late,” or “I forgot we were supposed to meet.”
- c. Try to repair the situation!
  - Sometimes when we feel bad, we offer some action or payment to make up for what we did. For example, “Can I pay for the damages?”, or “Let me buy you a drink on Saturday.”
- d. A promise that it won’t happen again!
  - Sometimes in English we say things like, “This won’t happen again.”

Sometimes we use all of these strategies, sometimes we use just one, and sometimes we use a combination. It depends on the situation!

Step 1: With your partner, brainstorm some real life situations when you might need to apologize in English.

Step 2: Pick two of those situations and write two short dialogues using the conversation strategies we’ve been talking about today.



Step 3: Show your dialogues to your teacher, make corrections, and then share them with another group or the whole class.

*Expected answers for Worksheet #1:*

(Step 1: Apologize) "Oh! I'm really sorry!"

(Step 2: Try to repair the situation) "Let me help get you something for that burn and help clean up the mess"

(Step 1: Apologize) "I'm really sorry!"

(Step 2: Take responsibility/explain) "I got confused about what day we were meeting."

(Step 3: Try to repair the situation) "How can I make it up to you? Can I buy you lunch on Friday?"

(Step 1: Apologize) "I'm so sorry!"

(Step 2: take responsibility/explain) "I'm so clumsy/ I'm too drunk."

(Step 3: try to repair the situation) "Let me help you clean it up/ can I pay for it to get cleaned?"

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Nicholas Fuller holds a bachelor's degree in Sociology and is currently an MA TESOL candidate at Hawaii Pacific University. He has taught EFL in China and ESL at a language school in Honolulu. His research interests include the use of authentic materials in the classroom, conversation analysis, and the effect of trauma on language learning.