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*Pedagogical Translation as a Naturally-Occurring Cognitive  
and Linguistic Activity in Foreign Language Learning*

It is clearly true that translation produces interference [...].  
However, bilinguals at whatever level experience interference  
of one kind or another, and practice in translation  
encourages awareness and control of interference.

(Malmkjær 1998, 8)

**Introduction**

Should FL teachers use or ban translation from the classroom? This seems to be one of the greatest FL teachers' dilemmas. There exist heated controversies on whether translation could be a valid and efficient teaching tool or a dangerous activity which can harm learning.

In the last few decades there has been an increasing interest in the translation practice in the language classroom. Confusion is at times made between "translation" and L1. Although these two terms are often seen as synonyms they are not the same thing as they involve different skills and strategies as also acknowledged by González-Davies –Scott-Tennent (2009). Translation and L1 are not interchangeable terms and only a few studies have explored translation on its own as a useful skill separated from L1 (Chesterman 1998; Malmkjær 1998; Deller – Rinvoluti 2002; González-Davies 2002; 2007; Owen 2003; Vaezi – Mirzaei 2007; Leonardi 2010). Confusion, however, arises because many common grounds exist between translation and L1 and their use is often associated with the so-called "Grammar-Translation" method which was badly criticised in the past and, as a result, both translation and L1 were banned from the foreign language class. Nowadays, however, there are significant and visible signs of revival of both translation and L1 in language teaching according to recent literature on applied linguistics (Malmkjær 1998, 1).

For the purpose of this work, translation is simply defined as one of the many ways in which L1 can be employed in the FL class. Translation is based upon a relationship between L1 and L2 in a sort of bilingual approach to language learning. In line with Cummins' Interdependence Hypothesis (1979) L1 and L2 literacy skills are seen to be interdependent (manifestations of a common underlying proficiency) where high levels of L1 proficiency help L2 acquisition and, conversely, high proficiency in L2 has a positive effect on L1. This relationship takes place in any learner's mind through a mental process known as "translation".

The use of translation in the FL class has always been at the core of heated controversies in the history of second language acquisition where many language practitioners agree upon the fact that the use of the mother tongue should be minimised whereas the use of the target language

should be maximised thus banning translation. Many language teachers and researchers are in favour of the so-called “monolingual approach” or “communicative approach” where the “English-only” policy is the key factor to successful learning whereas others suggest employing a “bilingual method”. This work firmly supports the so-called “bilingual approach” to language learning in line with recent research in applied linguistics and bilingualism which shows that the first language also plays a significant role in the learning process (Harley *et al.* 1990)<sup>1</sup>. Although the relationship between second language acquisition and cognitive ability continues to divide opinions, since the 1960s many studies have reported a positive association between second language learning and cognitive development (Cummins 1978; Peal – Lambert 1962). Lambert (1990), for instance, claims that bilinguals can remember twice as many items on a list of words if they are presented in the two languages (L1 and L2) and he strongly believes that the stored translation equivalents in the brain have a stronger basis in terms of imaginary representation and thus, they are remembered better.

Bilingual approaches favour the use of both L1 and translation and their association with cognitive development shows that although translation is a deliberate teaching choice for language teachers, it is, at the same time, a naturally-occurring and cognitive activity for students when learning a foreign language which cannot be stopped or avoided. Learners are constantly filtering and translating information through their L1. Therefore, if it is not possible to stop learners from translating, then it could be a good idea to teach them how to do it correctly by minimising interference and making them aware of the fact that there does not always exist a one-to-one correspondence between two languages. Translation could be very useful in this respect and if it is employed as the fifth skill along with reading, writing, listening and speaking then it could help learners develop and further strengthen their linguistic, cultural and communicative competences in a foreign language. Recent studies have focused on the benefits of using L1 in the EFL classes, especially at lower levels of proficiency (Tang 2002; Schweers 1999; Weschler 1997; Burden 2000; Cook 2001; Nation 2003; Malmkjaer 1998; Leonardi 2010; 2011). Furthermore, many theorists and language practitioners have explored a series of approaches based upon specific teaching activities to show how L1 can be incorporated into classes through a “judicious” and balanced use (Critchley 1999; Dujmovic 2007; Nation 2003). The only problem with these studies is that they are mainly theoretical and therefore it is felt that more empirical evidence is needed to show why and how L1 should be used (Leonardi, forthcoming).

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<sup>1</sup> The definition of bilingualism is complex and is influenced by multiple factors such as the age of acquisition of the second language and the continued exposure to the first language (L1) among others. For the purpose of this paper, the term bilingualism is used to refer to the ability to communicate in two different languages whereas the notion of bilingual approach in the classroom refers to the use of two different languages in classroom instruction.

This paper is aimed at showing the potentially beneficial role of translation in the FL class and it will be argued that language learning can be positively supported by a functional use of translation in a sort of “bilingual approach”. The aim of this paper is twofold: Firstly, it attempts to explain what is meant by “pedagogical translation” and how this activity could be successfully used in the classroom; secondly, it will provide a practical example of how L1 can be used through translation activities as a successful mediation skill in the primary school English classes through the application of the Pedagogical Translation Framework (PTF) developed by Leonardi (2010).

### **Banning translation from the FL classes**

Translation is undoubtedly a naturally-occurring activity and a persistent feature in FL learning. Although it has been heavily criticised and banned from the FL classes in the past, translation has always been used in educational contexts all over the world. Due to both the rise and establishment of *Translation Studies* as an academic discipline and the emergence of the Direct Method, the use of translation in the FL classes was pushed into the background, although it has never been banned completely. The reluctance of using translation in the FL classes was mainly due to the association of this activity with the old-fashioned Grammar-Translation Method (Leonardi 2010). This method was originally developed to teach Latin and Greek with a specific emphasis on the written form. It was characterised by endless lists of vocabulary in L1 and L2 and exercises consisted in translating single sentences out of context. Furthermore, grammar was taught through L1 and therefore there was not much exposure to L2. In other words, this method had little to offer in terms of oral proficiency.

The use of pedagogical translation, however, presupposes the use of both oral and written skills and translation activities can be carried out either in L1 or L2 or both at the same time depending on the teaching targets.

This study argues that both translation and FL teaching allow communication across languages and, as such, they should be integrated with one another rather than excluding each other. This means that translation is viewed as a valid and valuable pedagogical tool in FL teaching aimed at enhancing learner’s communicative competence and further strengthening writing, reading, speaking and listening skills (*Ibidem*).

Reluctance or failure to recognise the role of translation in FL teaching and learning can also be seen in the language skills normally tested and approved by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The CEFR provides a common basis for describing the skills needed to reach different levels of language proficiency, and is used by language instructors, educators, curriculum designers and agencies working in the field of language development. The

CEFR describes language proficiency in reading, writing, speaking and listening on a six-level scale:

CEFR band	CEFR level	
<b>C</b> Proficient user	C2	Mastery
	C1	Effective Operational Proficiency
<b>B</b> Independent user	B2	Vantage
	B1	Threshold
<b>A</b> Basic user	A2	Waystage
	A1	Breakthrough

These CEFR levels only include listening, speaking, reading and writing skills and there is no mention of translation activities as it is shown in the table below:

CEFR LEVELS	Listening/Speaking	Reading	Writing
C2	CAN advise on or talk about complex or sensitive issues, understanding colloquial references and dealing confidently with hostile questions.	CAN understand documents, correspondence and reports, including the finer points of complex texts.	CAN write letters on any subject and full notes of meetings or seminars with good expression and accuracy.
C1	CAN contribute effectively to meetings and seminars within own area of work or keep up a casual conversation with a good degree of fluency, coping with abstract expressions.	CAN read quickly enough to cope with an academic course, to read the media for information or to understand non-standard correspondence.	CAN prepare/draft professional correspondence, take reasonably accurate notes in meetings or write an essay which shows an ability to communicate.
B2	CAN follow or give a talk on a familiar topic or keep up a conversation on a fairly wide range of topics.	CAN scan texts for relevant information, and understand detailed instructions or advice.	CAN make notes while someone is talking or write a letter including non-standard requests.
B1	CAN express opinions on abstract/cultural matters in a limited way or offer advice within a known area, and understand instructions or public announcements.	CAN understand routine information and articles, and the general meaning of non-routine information within a familiar area.	CAN write letters or make notes on familiar or predictable matters.
A2	CAN express simple opinions or requirements in a familiar context.	CAN understand straightforward information within a known area, such as on products and signs and simple textbooks or reports on familiar matters.	CAN complete forms and write short simple letters or postcards related to personal information.
A1	CAN understand basic instructions or take part in a basic factual conversation on a predictable topic.	CAN understand basic notices, instructions or information.	CAN complete basic forms, and write notes including times, dates and places.

## **What is pedagogical translation?**

Apart from being an act of communication, translation is a complex activity which involves linguistic, cultural, communicative and cognitive factors. These factors are all closely intertwined with FL learning, thus making translation a necessary, unavoidable and naturally-occurring phenomenon when learning foreign languages. Schäffner (2002, 1) claims that there is «evidence of the increasing awareness of the complexity of translation as both a cognitive and a social activity, which cannot be fully explained by reference to concepts derived from (structural) linguistics only». Translation allows communication flow between two or more different linguistic communities and it allows people to establish contacts and relationships all over the world. Translation is a linguistic activity because a message is translated from one language into another by respecting both the source text (ST) language and message and the target language (TL) conventions. Translation is a cultural phenomenon because it bridges the gap between two cultures and mediates two cultures in such a way so as to narrow such a gap. Translation is a naturally-occurring cognitive activity which cannot be stopped. It seems to be quite normal to rely on translation when faced with foreign words and/or expressions. This study argues that forcing learners not to rely on translation is not totally productive; rather, they should be taught how to use their translation ability to the best.

Translation is not only a product but also a process and, as such, it should be included in the research field of neurosciences and cognitive sciences. Thanks to the neurosciences, indeed, linguistic disciplines have made significant progress by emphasising the important role of mental processes in language learning. Mental processes, indeed, are too often ignored in FL teaching and learning, especially in the case of translation which is too often defined in very simple terms as a linguistic activity and a linguistic product. Translation, however, is a complex cognitive activity aimed at decoding the ST, transferring both linguistic and cultural elements and meanings into the TL and encoding the text into the new language and context. This mental process can be carried out either consciously or unconsciously by the learner and, as such, it cannot be avoided.

Nowadays, many theorists, linguists, teachers and language practitioners seem to agree on the importance of using translation in language classes. Schäffner (1998, 125), for instance, claims that translation and related exercises could be beneficial to FL learning:

- a) to improve verbal agility;
- b) to expand students' vocabulary in L2;
- c) to develop their style;
- d) to improve their understanding of how languages work;
- e) to consolidate L2 structures for active use;

- f) to monitor and improve the comprehension of L2.

Translation should be neither associated with the Grammar-Translation method nor with the traditional activity aimed at training translators. Translation in foreign language classes becomes a form of pedagogical translation aimed at enhancing and further improving reading, writing, speaking and listening skills (Leonardi 2010). Leonardi (2010, 81f.) claims that:

The proper use of pedagogical translation can show how this activity is not uncommunicative and that it does not merely focus on accuracy. Translation exercises can serve a variety of purposes ranging from linguistic problems to more cultural, semantic and pragmatic concerns. Furthermore, translation can help learners enhance their analytical and problem-solving skills which are essential in everyday life as well as in most working fields.

Pedagogical translation, therefore, is the fifth skill which supports and complements the other four language skills and its application in the FL class can be a good way to foster bilingualism.

### **The Pedagogical translation framework application**

As mentioned above, one of the potential ways to integrate L1 in FL classes can be through the use of translation activities. Translation can be a successful bilingual teaching tool based upon the assumption that since it is not possible to force students not to use their L1, then they should learn from early stages how to control it in terms of interference and how to make the best out of it. Even when a course is entirely taught in L2, learners are (un)consciously processing and filtering the information mentally through a series of cognitive processes involving translation into their L1.

Pedagogical translation can be successfully employed at any level of proficiency and in any educational context, be it school or University, as a valuable and creative teaching aid to support, integrate and further strengthen the four traditional language skills, reading, writing, speaking and listening. In this respect, it is worth applying Leonardi's recently devised framework, called PTF (2010, 87), whose application takes into account a variety of factors, such as:

- 1) Students' proficiency level;
- 2) Direction of translation, that is, from L1 into L2 or vice versa;
- 3) Focus on one or more language skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening);
- 4) School vs. University or professional courses teaching requirements;
- 5) General vs. specialised language requirements;
- 6) Time availability;
- 7) Small vs. large classes.

The PTF is made up of three main types of translation activities which are further divided into sub-groups as also shown in figure 1:

<p><u><i>Pre-Translation Activities:</i></u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Brainstorming</li><li>- Vocabulary preview</li><li>- Anticipation guides</li></ul> <p><u><i>Translation Activities:</i></u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Reading activities</li><li>- Speaking and Listening</li><li>- Writing</li><li>- Literal translation</li><li>- Summary translation</li><li>- Parallel texts</li><li>- Re-translation</li><li>- Grammar explanation</li><li>- Vocabulary builder and facilitator</li><li>- Cultural mediation and intercultural competence development</li></ul> <p><u><i>Post-Translation Activities:</i></u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Written or oral translation commentary</li><li>- Written or oral summary of the ST</li><li>- Written composition about ST-related topics</li></ul>
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**Fig. 1.** *Pedagogical Translation Framework Basic Structure*, adapted from Leonardi (2010, 88).

### **Practical PTF application**

This section is aimed at showing how through the use of some translation activities it is possible to teach vocabulary to young children in line with the above-mentioned PTF.

- Text type: Fairytale
- Translation direction: From L2 to L1
- L2: English
- L1: Italian
- Proficiency level: A1
- Type of class: monolingual / young learners
- Aims:
  - Teach vocabulary related to:
    - Adjectives
    - Family relationships
  - Practise reading

- Create a bilingual glossary

For the purpose of this activity, Cinderella was chosen because it includes some interesting examples of vocabulary related to:

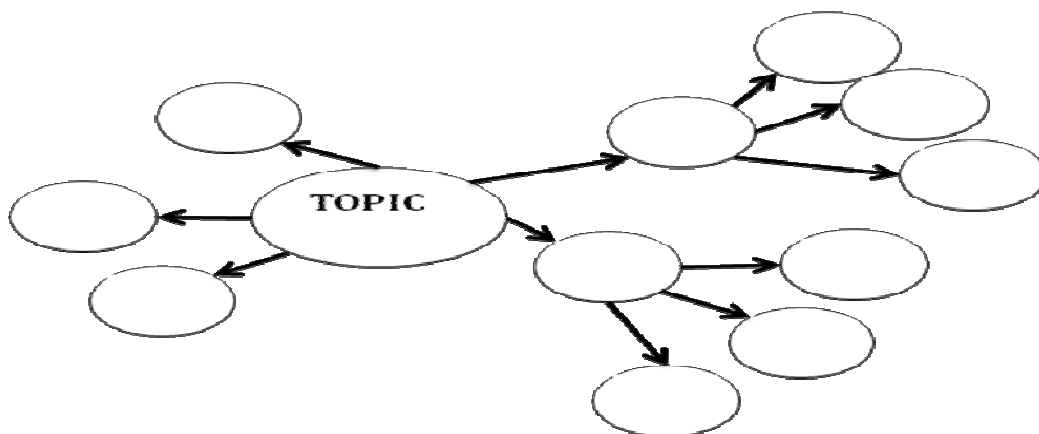
- 1) Family relationships (mother, father, step-mother, etc.)
- 2) Adjectives (beautiful, ugly, big, etc.)
- 3) Clothes (dress, shoes, etc.)

Pre-translation activities: Brainstorming/Vocabulary preview

Teachers should make sure that new vocabulary is properly introduced and existing vocabulary is fairly revised and/or consolidated before presenting a text and its translation to learners.

If teachers are interested in teaching vocabulary related to family relationships, for instance, it could be a good idea to start the class activity with either a brainstorming activity or a vocabulary preview activity aimed at introducing new words and, possibly, revising previously taught vocabulary.

Depending on age, proficiency and background knowledge this activity can be either carried out in both L1 and L2 or exclusively in L2 and pictures can be included to facilitate learning and draw children's attention. The following template is only an example suggested by Leonardi (2010, 89) but it can be adapted and modified according to needs:



Learners are exposed to an extract from Cinderella's fairytale in both English and Italian. The fairytale chosen for this kind of activity should be written exclusively for young learners so that both languages (English and Italian) make use of simple words and structures. The texts should be aligned so that there is a direct correspondence between the English and the Italian text. At this stage, the English text will include a few gaps which will be later filled in by learners whereas the



Italian text will have no gaps to help learners choose the correct word to use in the English text. Teachers could ask students, by using L1 for instructions, to find the missing words in the English text by using the English words included in the brainstorming chart. Learners should be reminded that the Italian text is there to help and they can rely on the translated words in the Italian text to choose the correct word to insert in the gaps of the English text. These words can be highlighted to facilitate the translation task.

Alternatively, if teachers are working with existing vocabulary, learners can be asked to find the translation equivalents of the words in the brainstorming chart in the Italian text and highlight them. Once they have found the correct Italian equivalent for all the words included in the brainstorming chart, they can then proceed to fill in the gaps in the English text with the correct word.

#### Post-translation activity: Bilingual glossary creation

Once learners have finished their translation and vocabulary building activity, it could be a good idea to ask them to write the English words along with their Italian translation or vice versa (depending on the direction of the translation task) in their notebooks in order to create a bilingual glossary. Since teachers are dealing with young learners, the glossary can also include a picture of the word so that comprehension and memorization can be facilitated through the use of both linguistic and extra-linguistic features.

Finally, teachers could either read the story aloud or ask learners (depending on task requirement, time availability and proficiency level) to do the reading. Both reading and listening skills will be covered and pronunciation can also be taught.

### **Concluding remarks**

Translation allows the transfer of language skills from one language to another and the cognitive abilities acquired in the learning of one language (L1) can be put to use in the acquisition and proficiency of other languages (L2) and vice versa. In this respect, translation becomes an efficient bilingual teaching tool to supplement reading, writing, listening and speaking skills. This study argued that translation cannot be avoided as students are persistently translating into and out of their L1 when learning a foreign language. If they are told how to use translation skills properly, then they can make the best out of their learning. Pedagogical translation should not be thought of as «a means aimed at training professional translators but rather as a means to help learners acquire, develop and further strengthen their knowledge and competence in a foreign language» (Leonardi 2010, 17). It is wrong to think of translation as an exclusive exercise aimed at teaching learners how

to translate. Translation in FL classes allows better understanding of language structures and, at the same time, it encourages analytical and problem-solving skills. Through translation exercises students have the possibility to compare and contrast structures and lexical items. In other words, pedagogical translation is a naturally-occurring cognitive, linguistic and communicative learning activity to be promoted rather than neglected.

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