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L1, consensus nil: Factors affecting the erratic application of oral translation as an EFL vocabulary teaching technique at Japanese universities

Stuart Gale

Abstract This paper reviews the rehabilitation of the learner's first language (L1) in pedagogic literature and, more specifically, the teacher's use of oral translation into the L1 as a vocabulary teaching technique. A survey conducted at a Japanese university reveals that, while oral translation is applied in some way and to some extent by a vast majority of EFL teachers, it is not subject to any consistent methodology and still suffers from credibility issues. The paper refers to teachers dispensing oral translation as if it were a one-stop shortcut to learning and suggests that its application without prior or subsequent complementation has become commonplace. Though this may be attributed to teachers being generally more cognizant of the restored legitimacy of the L1 than to the finer details pertaining to its use, the paper suggests that this lack of criticality has exacerbated feelings of confusion and guilt among the EFL community.

The underlying problem: translating CLT

Exponents of the communicative approach have always professed a willingness to accommodate "any device which helps the learners" (Finocchiaro & Brumfit, as cited in Richards & Rodgers, 1986, p. 67). This pragmatism is as commendable as it is shrewd, the implicit lack of methodological clarity rendering communicative language teaching (CLT) as adaptable to context as it is immune to shifts in pedagogic fashion. Small wonder then that the post-CLT world, insofar as it can be said to exist at all, has little to distinguish it from what was always an object lesson in *laissez-faire*. It is, after all, difficult to find a pretext for revolution when there is nothing specific to revolt against.

The above quotation from Finocchiaro and Brumfit is a case point. That it offers the language teacher *carte blanche* in terms of classroom procedure reflects the intrinsic beauty of CLT and its inherent weakness.

Associate Professor, Fukuoka Prefectural University

On the one hand it is contextually sensitive and personally empowering, the teacher being entrusted with a handful of platitudes and directives so vague as to be virtually discretionary. That this lack of prescription is susceptible to rogue interpretation and abuse is neatly anticipated by what is presented as the flip side of empowerment, i.e. self-reflection and personal responsibility. In the event of disappointment, either may be invoked to deflect blame away from the approach and towards the teacher and/or student.

From its very inception then, CLT was neither forced nor inclined to explain itself in specific procedural terms. That it chose to do so, or at least chose to risk compromising itself by singling out certain techniques for approval, may have had more to do with market expectation than consistent and well-grounded pedagogic theory. What is certain is that CLT has proved far more adept at overturning established techniques than at imposing a uniform set of alternatives. Thus, and more than thirty years after its supposed rehabilitation, experts are still engaged in restoring at least one of those alternative techniques, namely translation, to full respectability in the mind of the modern EFL teacher.

Though wholly in accord with the principles of empowerment, this disregard for contemporary linguistic opinion is impressive given that any pretence to authentic debate on the issue of translation's legitimacy petered out years ago. On a theoretical level at least, those previously inclined to hold their ground against the pro-translation lobby seem to have upped and left. Indeed, further protestations on translation's behalf would be entirely redundant were it not for the dogged persistence of an "L1 stigma" among teachers. Nevertheless, and despite the greater issue no longer being much of an issue at all, the "good thing/bad thing" debate has retained a degree of relevance by informing subsequent discussion on the finer point as to how translation should be applied.

As already established, CLT's mandate for teacher autonomy militates against standardization and, as a consequence, teachers have typically been obliged to weigh up some or all of the arguments both for and against translation on the way to determining appropriate use. That this is a haphazard and highly personal process is apparent from the disparate attitudes and modes of application exhibited by different teachers operating in identical contexts. Nevertheless, the fact that the vast majority of teachers interviewed for the purposes of this study were willing and able to employ translation to some extent does at least suggest that it is an attractive and viable proposition.

The case against translation

"This is a personal decision, but it is generally agreed that the mother tongue should not be used in the foreign-language classroom. It encourages translation (which only confuses…)" (Extract from the "Guidelines for teachers" manual from an EFL school in Japan).

The ambivalence that has tempered the use of translation and the L1 *per se* in language learning classrooms for 40 years or so is symptomatic of the inherent nature of CLT and the contrary forces affecting it. Regarding the latter, if any new approach is to take hold and flourish, it must show itself to be distinct from and in some way superior to whatever it seeks to replace. In the case of an emergent CLT, this implied attacking not one but two philosophies (situational language teaching and the audiolingual method being largely concurrent in the late sixties/early seventies), with the higher premium being attached to whatever could be invoked to refute both simultaneously. Seen from this perspective, CLT's sponsoring of translation was an opportunistic marketing ploy designed to embarrass conservatives and capitalize upon shifts in the greater political climate. Since neither of its immediate predecessors had seen fit to incorporate the mother tongue, it enabled the new approach to stand alone on a point of principle vaguely evocative of other contemporary causes (against the backdrop of an unpopular war in Vietnam and appeals for racial and sexual equality, any petition on behalf of learners wishing to use their own language was always going to be sympathetically received). Indeed, it may have even endowed those "revolutionary" epithets beloved of publishers with a resonance beyond mere hyperbole.

Nevertheless, that CLT also failed to make a sufficiently persuasive pedagogic case for translation is apparent from its lingering status as, for many, a technique beyond the pale of "good teaching". This antipathy is reflected not only in the manner in which EFL teachers currently apply translation, but also in their reluctance to "out" themselves as L1-users in any shape or form (Copland & Neokleous, 2010). Furthermore, and though it may be indicative of the extent to which all other philosophies have fallen by the wayside, it is ironic that those most inclined to resist the reinstatement of translation have typically done so on grounds of protecting the integrity of CLT (Celik, 2003, p. 362). By invoking the principle of comprehensible input in the L2, translation has been vilified and accused of fostering bad habits and "lazy minds" (Anthony, as cited in Zimmerman, 1997, p. 14; Gefen, 1987, p. 42), a stigma which, though in decline, persists to this

day. More specifically, and with reference to the primary focus of this study, the case against the teacher's use of oral translation into the L1 as a vocabulary teaching technique may be distilled into the following 3 arguments:

i) Translation is incapable of instilling knowledge regarding a word's "contextual relations", i.e. its paradigmatic and syntagmatic associations (Cruse, as cited in Jullian, 2000, p. 40). More specifically, it does not teach related grammar patterns, affixes, common lexical sets, *etc.* (Prince, 1996, pp. 478-493; Jullian, 2000, pp. 37-46).
ii) According to the relativist hypothesis, translation "confounds and complicates vocabulary acquisition in the L2 by ignoring crosslingual differences in conceptual classification and differences in the semantic boundaries of seemingly corresponding words in the L1 and L2" (Ijaz, as cited in Ellis, 1997, p. 134; Byram, 1997, p. 52).
iii) Translation has long been dogged by the allegation that it is not conducive to retention, and is even relatively poor in this respect. By resorting to it "we weaken the impression which the word makes on the mind" (Billows, as cited in Richards and Rodgers, 1986, p. 36).

This final argument rests on the assumption that oral translation in some way discourages students from interacting with the L2 words they hear or read. It forms the basis of the "lazy minds" accusation referred to above and is borne out by Laufer and Hulstijn's more refined hypothesis (2001, pp. 1-26) linking the degree of retention to a level of involvement determined by *need*, *search* (i.e. the effort expended while deciphering meaning) and *evaluation* (comparing the item with other words and using it in communication). From this perspective, the almost complete lack of cognitive processing (as represented by the search component) engendered by the teacher's use of oral translation is especially damning. By eliminating all anticipation of the "eureka moment", i.e. that point at which the student naturally and internally translates, it implies that "no pain, no gain" is as applicable to building lexical corpora as it is to physical stamina.

3) The case for translation

"There are many ways of communicating word meanings. The best are clear, simple and brief. Where possible, the first language translation should be given" (Nation, 2005; 2008, p. 5).

As we have already seen, CLT has accepted the plaudits for championing the L1 without ever quite managing to de-stigmatize it outright. This is not for want of trying, and the current obsession with the L1 in linguistic literature may

be regarded as a belated attempt to relieve closet-translators of a collective guilt complex (Copland & Neokleous, 2010). As Ellis has pointed out, "the acquisition of L2 words usually involves a mapping of the new word onto pre-existing conceptual meanings or onto L1 translation equivalents", thereby practically guaranteeing that "learners translate unconsciously anyway" (1997, pp. 133-134; Laufer, Meara, and Nation, 2005, p. 4). Nevertheless, and with a view to eradicating the last remnants of the L1 stigma at grassroots level, those in favour of translation being applied as a vocabulary teaching technique in some shape or form have continued to reiterate the following point-specific counter-arguments to the criticisms cited above:

i)Ideally, every new vocabulary item should have its proper paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations precisely defined. That this does not always happen is indicative of the fact that it is virtually impossible and even inadvisable under normal classroom conditions. To cite an example, a group of learners was asked to study fifty-plus new words over three classes– enough to put molehills on the football pitches of their "lexical acquisition plateaus", but nevertheless tantamount to overload and a poor return on the time invested (Jullian, 2000, pp. 37-46). This is not to suggest that meticulous instruction is always futile and/or supererogatory, only that truly *knowing* and, by extension, *teaching a word* involves a protracted cognitive process irreconcilable with some student aptitudes, most syllabuses and the usual time constraints. At the very least it necessitates a careful process of selection and compromise, both in terms of what to teach and to what degree, and presupposes that merely communicating meaning relative to the context in which the word appears and with no further elaboration will be, in many if not most cases, reasonable and sufficient (Sonbul & Schmitt, 2008, p. 254).

From this perspective, the great store placed in oral translation by time-pressed teachers with other, arguably more important agendas beyond the teaching of vocabulary can hardly be regarded as grounds for indictment. This is especially true in relation to incidental, "low priority words" undeserving of explicit instruction (Nation, 2008, p. 98). Nevertheless, contemporary linguistic opinion has still tended to downplay the legitimacy of oral translation's use as an isolated expedient, preferring instead to emphasize its contribution to whatever greater incremental process the teacher wishes to apply under the auspices of truly teaching a word (e.g. Celik, 2003; Folse, 2004; Laufer, Meara, & Nation, 2005). This not only presupposes the

feasibility of using several techniques in conjunction with each other, but also implicitly confirms that oral translation is only as deficient in terms of its ability to teach contextual relations as any other technique bar exhaustive explanation in either the L1 or L2.

ii)As Nation has pointed out, "the difficulties caused by no exact correspondence between meanings in the L1 and L2 are probably less that the difficulties caused by the lack of correspondence between L2 definitions and the meaning they are trying to convey" (2001, p. 351). While Nation does not, of course, seek to discourage the use of the L2 in this way, he does reveal the extent to which the case against the L1 has been overstated. A more reasonable interpretation of the relativist hypothesis would be to suggest that only some lexical items "are particularly rich carriers of cultural meanings and therefore more difficult to grasp for speakers of another language" (Byram, 1997, p. 54). Rather than regard all things as unequal, the opposite may therefore be assumed to be true via an equivalence hypothesis (Swan, 1997, p. 168). How well this works in practice depends upon the extent to which the individual's hypothesis is realistic and, secondly, the veracity of Folse's contention that "the number of words that do not translate well... is miniscule in the big language picture" (2004, p. 63). What is certain is that even young learners are aware of transfer limitations and are capable of overcoming or even exploiting them.

iii)The assumption that translation does not engender retention seems to have been based more on the pedagogic equivalent of an old wives' tale than on solid empirical research. Certainly it has been sustained over the years by the wholly unforgiving stigma still attached to the grammar translation method. Nevertheless, those seeking to redress the balance have become gradually bolder over time– from Carter and McCarthy's guarded concession in the late eighties that the case against translation had "not been convincingly demonstrated" (1988, p. 15), to Prince a few years later actually finding in favour of translation before warning his readership off such "low effort strategies" (1996, p. 489). This restraint had largely disappeared by the late nineties however, with the link between translation and inferior retention relative to an L2 gloss (Laufer & Shmueli, 1997) and pictures (Lotto & de Groot, 1998) being not only overturned but inverted (i.e. in both instances, translation was unequivocally shown to have had the superior effect upon retention). Though it is important to note that these studies refer to *written* (and not oral) translation, they demonstrate that the more legitimate question is

how, and not whether, the L1 should be applied in the EFL classroom.

Pro-L1 revisionists today tend to accentuate the advantages inherent to oral translation and the fact that most of its limitations are equally applicable to most other vocabulary teaching techniques. In both instances the onus is on the incontestably obvious: oral translation is conducive to "off-the-cuff" deployment and speedy conveyance; requires no preparation or auxiliary materials; and works irrespective of the L2 proficiency of the learner or the word under scrutiny. That it is also perceived to operate according to "the same processes as translation into a picture, a description in English, and so on" (Nation, 1990, p. 52) only serves to reinforce the case for reinstatement while throwing the non-exclusive nature of its limitations into starker contrast. The bottom line is that, if one presumes to attack translation on the basis of it disregarding contextual relations, misleading the learner semantically and imbuing less-than-ideal retention rates, then the same charges must also be leveled at mime, pictures, realia and (under normal time constraints) explanation in either the L1 or L2.

The only limitation left standing in terms of it being solely applicable to translation is that tendency to divert time and attention away from the target language and towards the mother tongue. This nips at the very heart of translation's *modus operandi* and plays upon fears that it may cause a class to degenerate to the point where the L2 is incidental to the L1 rather than the other way around. Here again, however, this type of forecast tends to be unduly pessimistic. The opening of the L1 floodgates is by no means an inevitable by-product of translation and, as shown below, is not borne out by the day-to-day experience of classroom teachers. Worst-case scenarios such as these are generally avoided through a process of negotiation, with the relevant issues (authority, responsibility, restraint, *etc.*) being incumbent to the contextual setting of the classroom. Recent research has confirmed that EFL students appreciate the incorporation of the L1 in whatever form and that it is conducive to L2 acquisition (Critchley, 1999; Liu, 2008; Brooks-Lewis, 2009). Rather than attacking oral translation for what it might conceivably entail but usually doesn't, it might therefore be more reasonable to give credit for what must be an impressive success rate– an assumption made on the grounds that teachers are not, for the most part, inclined to sabotage their own lessons.

Survey objectives

"Much of the canon of applied linguistic belief rests on studies which many people

do not understand. If a few influential commentators accept and cite the results, then the field as a whole tends to accept them, even though very few people have examined and thought about the studies in any depth" (Schmitt & McCarthy, 1997, p. 229).

The above quotation refers to a lack of criticality which, in the case of translation, has had a peculiarly polarizing effect upon contemporary EFL teachers eager to devise contextually appropriate methodologies or justify whatever they would in any case prefer to do (Ford, 2009, p. 77). On the one hand, the reinstatement of translation as a legitimate vocabulary teaching technique has prompted some teachers to apply it in ways that may be regarded as excessive while, on the other, a dying breed of adherents to the principle of exclusive input in the L2 are still to be found. A survey (Appendix) of the relevant attitudes and practices current among native-speaker EFL instructors at a Japanese university returned the following data:

a)Of the 12 teachers interviewed, 11 use oral translation into the L1 as a vocabulary teaching technique in some way and to some extent.

b)In justifying the decision not to apply oral translation, the outstanding teacher referred to a lack of Japanese ability rather than a point of pedagogic principle.

c)Of the 11 oral translators, only one admitted to using it "always, or almost always".

d)The remaining 10 apply oral translation under a variety of circumstances, with "when I'm pushed for time" and "when other techniques do not lend themselves easily to the vocabulary item in question" being the most cited.

e)Regarding their thoughts on how oral translation should optimally be applied, 7 teachers chose "as a confirmatory step, after other techniques have established the meaning of the vocabulary item". Of the remaining respondents, one thought oral translation should be applied as an initial step prior to other techniques, while 4 vouched for its use in isolation.

f) This breakdown underwent a small degree of change when the scenario shifted from the ideal to the actual, with one more teacher being prepared to admit to "most often" applying oral translation in isolation (rather than as a confirmatory step).

g)In terms of its ability to form accurate semantic links relative to "most other techniques", 3 respondents thought oral translation "less effective", while 5 thought it "as effective" and 4 "more effective".

h)In terms of its ability to form durable semantic links relative to "most other techniques", 4 respondents thought

oral translation "less effective", while 7 thought it "as effective" and one "more effective" .

i) Regarding the frequency with which using oral translation caused the L1 to intrude to an unwelcome degree, 4 respondents chose "rarely or never", 6 "sometimes" and 2 "often".

j) In the event of their class being observed by a prospective employer, 5 of the respondents would be less inclined to use oral translation, while 7 would not be affected by his/her presence. None said they would be more inclined to use oral translation.

Analysis and discussion

Though the survey data was far from emphatic on anything other than oral translation's use in some way and to some extent by the vast majority of those surveyed, it does allow the following 3 generalizations to be made:

i) *There is little or no consensus among teachers as to how and when oral translation should be applied as a vocabulary teaching technique*. While the respondents were unanimous in acknowledging its place in their "permissible repertoires" (survey results *a* and *b* above) and were mostly confident in its efficacy relative to other techniques (*g* and *h*), only one regarded oral translation as an indispensable feature of vocabulary teaching (*c*). That the vast majority also made its use contingent upon a variety of adverse circumstances (*d*) suggests that oral translation is not so much systematically applied as resorted to on a sporadic and expedient basis.

ii) *Oral translation is widely used as an alternative to a multi-faceted vocabulary teaching process*. While 8 respondents complied with the revisionist view that oral translation is best applied in conjunction with other techniques (*e*), the remaining 4 (or one-third of all respondents) vouched for its use in isolation. The slight discrepancy between what a teacher would ideally do and what he or she actually does (*e* and *f*) furthermore suggests that an awareness of the conditional nature of oral translation's application does not necessarily preclude its use as a one-stop expedient.

iii) *Many teachers are still reluctant to out themselves as oral translators*. This reticence does not seem to stem from teachers being unaware of recent revisionism or disagreeing with it, but rather from them anticipating or deferring to third-party assumptions and prejudices. All 5 of the respondents who said that they would be less inclined to apply oral translation in the event of them being observed by a potential employer (*j*) referred to the persistence

of the translation stigma and the need to pay lip service to it.

This sensitivity toward external conservative forces may also account for any disparity or lag between what theoreticians recommend and what practitioners (i.e. teachers in monolingual EFL classrooms) actually do. As to the source of the stigma, those attitudes embodied by the educational context were found to be most pervasive ("my feeling is that there is a bias against translation in Japan...if it were another country I might have said it wouldn't affect me"), though one respondent also referred to her teacher-training instructors in Canada "railing against the crutch of the L1". While the extent to which such external and potentially conflicting pressures are accommodated and deferred to will naturally depend upon the individual in question, it is nevertheless reasonable to assume that the expectations of trainers, employers, peers and students will impinge upon any attempt to devise an appropriate methodology.

The decision as to whether or not to employ oral translation as a vocabulary teaching technique is therefore far more complicated and politically-charged than one might suspect, and certainly goes well beyond a cursory appraisal of contemporary pedagogic fashion. Ultimately, a perceived obligation to defer to whomever the teacher feels most accountable (not necessarily the students) may hold more sway than any other principle, empirically-based or not (*i*). Nevertheless, it is to testing the efficacy of oral translation relative to other vocabulary teaching techniques that I shall turn in a forthcoming edition of this journal.

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Appendix

Survey Distributed to Native-speaker EFL Teachers at a Japanese University

Note to respondents: For the purposes of this survey, *translation* refers to *oral (verbal) translation of a vocabulary item from English into*

Japanese.

1) Which of the following most accurately describes your relationship with translation?

a) I always or almost always translate, when I can.

b) I never or very seldom translate.

c) I sometimes translate.

2) If your answer to the question 1 was "b", why do you never or very seldom translate?

a) Lack of confidence in my Japanese language ability.

b) Other reason(s) (*please specify*)

3) If your answer to question 1 was "c", under what circumstances do you translate (you may choose more than one option) ?

a) When I feel the vocabulary item in question isn't that important.

b) When I'm pushed for time.

c) When only one or a few students are stuck on the vocabulary item in question.

d) When other techniques do not lend themselves easily to the vocabulary item in question.

e) When other techniques have failed and/or require extra clarification/reinforcement.

f) Other reason (s) (*please specify*)

4) How do you think translation should be optimally applied ? (*please choose the option closest to your opinion*)

a) In isolation.

b) As an initial step, followed by other techniques such as explanation in the target language.

c) As a confirmatory step, after other techniques have established the meaning of the vocabulary item in question.

d) Translation should never be applied.

5) In actuality, how do you most often apply translation? (*please choose the option closest to your opinion*)

a) In isolation.

b) As an initial step, followed by other techniques such as explanation in the L2.

c) As a confirmatory step, after other techniques have established the meaning of the vocabulary item in question.

d) I never apply translation.

6) In terms of forming ACCURATE semantic links, how do you feel translation compares with other techniques commonly applied to the teaching of vocabulary (e.g. mime, pictures, realia, explanation in the target language, *etc.*) ?

a) Translation is more effective than most other techniques.

b) Translation is less effective than most other techniques.

c) Translation is as effective as most other techniques.

7) In terms of forming DURABLE semantic links, how do you feel translation compares with other techniques commonly applied to the teaching of vocabulary (e.g. mime, pictures, realia, explanation in the target language, *etc.*) ?

a) Translation is more effective than most other techniques.

b) Translation is less effective than most other

techniques.

c) Translation is as effective as most other techniques.

8) In your experience, does the teacher translating difficult vocabulary items in, for example, a reading passage encourage the students to use their L1 to an unwelcome degree (i.e. when they should be using the L2) ?

a) Always

b) Often

c) Sometimes

d) Rarely

e) Never

9) If your class was being observed by a prospective employer you didn't know and whom you wanted to impress, would you be more or less inclined to use translation?

a) More inclined.

b) Less inclined.

c) It wouldn't affect me.

10) Very briefly, please explain your reasoning to question 9.