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# Expanding Vocabulary Through Translation – An Eclectic Approach

## Abstract

Owing mostly to the overwhelming tide of a communicative approach in foreign language teaching, translation was widely excluded from language classes for much of the 20th century. Nevertheless, translation never went away completely; it patiently waited for a time when the language teaching community would again discover synergies between translation and established approaches, thence reassess its lost potential. As is established herein, such potential is at its greatest and most effective in relation to vocabulary, where - based on an eclectic method which can be applied at all stages in specialised and general language teaching – the author believes translation is both necessary and effective.

This paper, building on the theoretical and methodological frameworks, together with the author's own classroom observations, reassesses the role of translation and proposes a set of activities which could be used by teachers of English for specific purposes and translator trainers alike. It concludes with a recommendation as to the universal applicability of translation, especially in the context of languages for specific purposes and translator training.

**Keywords:** translation, vocabulary, grammar-translation method, communicative approach, lexical approach, English for specific purposes.

## 1. Introduction

For much of the 20th century, use of a student's first language as well as translation were largely excluded from language for specific purposes (LSP) teaching, translation

training and general foreign language classes. This was for the most part due to the overwhelming tide of the communicative approach which rejected and replaced the centuries-old and indeed - in some aspects - obsolete grammar-translation method. In this article, my aim has been to establish and present various reasons for this development and, building on theoretical and methodological frameworks advanced by these approaches, to highlight their individual disadvantages and benefits in terms of vocabulary acquisition.

My hitherto experience in foreign language teaching (FLT) at BA and MA levels has involved various applications of translation using both the students' native language (Slovene - L1) as well as English as a foreign language (L2) for the purpose of teaching and translation. Not having been trained as a language teacher, but a translator, and lacking formal knowledge of language teaching beyond that which has been self-acquired, I nevertheless feel that vocabulary plays an important role in a student's acquisition and development of native-like language and translation skills, which remains my primary and foremost concern and objective. Upon embarking on PhD studies that have focused on the role of translation in language acquisition, I found this belief justified by pedagogic and translation theoreticians and practitioners alike, foremost by the followers of the so-called lexical approach developed in the mid-1990s by British lexicologist Michael Lewis. Combining this knowledge with the still neglected topic of translation in FLT, I therefore make a case for reassessment of the role of translation in building L2 vocabulary, and furthermore propose a set of activities which could be used by teachers when teaching L2 in LSP classes, general FLT classes and/or translator training tutorials alike.

Through a review of FLT and translation theory, I have drawn on the following types of materials:

1. handbooks, theoretical and methodological guides to general foreign language teaching, focusing mostly on the English language (e.g. Hedge 2003, Larsen-Freeman 2003, and Lewis 1997),
2. theoretical monographs and articles on specialised language teaching (Harding 2007, Hutchinson and Waters 1996) and,
3. theoretical and practical literature on translation in language teaching (e.g. Cook 2010, Malmkjaer and Williams 1998, and Duff 1994).

The methodological approaches are supplemented by my own classroom experience and observations.

## 2. Theories

Owing to the overwhelming tide of communicative approaches during much of the 20th century, use of students' L1 - together with translation into and from it - has been largely expelled from foreign language classes. This dismissal of translation has been primarily based on the wholesale rejection of the grammar-translation method which had, particularly in the domain of classical languages such as Latin and Greek,

dominated foreign language teaching for centuries. Criticism of the method was primarily directed towards the issue of "grammar" rather than the "translation" aspect; critics claimed that its focus was exclusively upon grammatical accuracy and rules which should be committed to memory, and that communication skills were placed second behind writing and reading proficiency. In addition to being considered de-motivating and dull, it was also deemed that the learning outcomes attained using the grammar-translation method differed from the students' own expectations.

Within the context of the grammar-translation method, translation received criticism for its application of literary, unnatural or artificial texts, or even isolated sentences, which were selected or devised from scratch primarily to serve the purposes of grammatical explicitation. Again, the critique was that such texts were promoting knowledge about a language rather than an ability to use it, that they were ill-suited for all learners save those with an inclination to literature, and that such an approach was not developed from real-life practice (for more on this, as well as the comparisons of methods, see e.g. Cook 2010, Carreres 2006, and Larsen-Freeman 2003).

The communicative approach, as the method which replaced grammar-translation and which held a central role in FLT throughout the 20th century, rested above all on monolingualism, i.e. the postulated exclusive use of L2 both within and beyond the language classroom. The argumentation behind this approach is that above all students need to be prepared for communicative situations where only L2 will be used, thus no resort to L1 is required. The best monolingual teacher and the ideal narrator being at one and the same time a native speaker of L2, while the best way to acquire the language was to replicate the language learning process of a child in its acquisition of a first language (Cook 2010). In response to criticism directed at the grammar-translation method in terms of text and material selection, the communicative approach postulated the use of non-contrived texts and examples, together with learning situations which imitate real life.

Despite addressing and contributing to the introduction of some undoubtedly important aspects of the language learning process, such as the use of authentic materials and real-life communicative situations, the communicative approach and its postulated monolingualism effectively excluded translation from the language learning curriculum. Such exclusion is contrary to the intuition of teachers and students alike, as well as their awareness of possible and existing connections between two languages; though arguably the most convincing reason of all lies in the fact that translation will naturally and inevitably happen during the foreign language acquisition process, as reported e.g. by Lewis in 1997. As a result, translation never actually vanished completely from the foreign language classroom, and patiently waits the reassessment of its latent potentials by the language teaching community.

One of the areas of FLT where a "natural" use of translation seems most apparent is the acquisition of new vocabulary. It is my firm belief that every teacher applying a monolingual approach can report at least one instance when - after painstaking description and explanation of a word - their bilingual students would arrive at that "aha" moment, having translated the term into their native language. Such examples

reveal that for bilingual learners translation is necessarily implicated in the process of understanding, simply because the student links and relates newly acquired words in L2 to their extant L1 vocabulary.

As reported from the FLT classroom, as well as in the literature of some FLT authors, e.g. Hedge in 2003, vocabulary has long been subject to neglect; this is quite surprising, especially when one considers that "errors of vocabulary are potentially more misleading than those of grammar" (Hedge 2003: 111). Such can, however, be explained by the fact that the task of vocabulary learning is substantial, permanent and on-going throughout the language-learning process.

For purposes of clarity, I would add that herein "vocabulary" should be understood not solely as individual lexical items or words, but also of multi-word constituents and phrases, or so called "chunks", according to the theory devised and promoted by Michael Lewis (Lewis 1993, 1997). I herein also adopt Lewis' taxonomy of lexical item-types, which has proven helpful in my own mapping of observations and classroom practice:

Lexical Item	Examples
Words	invitation; speaker
Polywords (lexical phrases)	on behalf of; in my own name
Collocations	keynote speaker; major paper, latest research
Institutionalised utterances	We look forward to seeing you; Please do not hesitate to contact us...
Sentence frames and heads	That is not as [adjective] as you think; The danger was...
Text frames	I would like to invite you...; In closing,...

Table 1: Taxonomy of Lexical Items (Lewis, 1997)<sup>1</sup>

Combining communicative and lexical theories with the proven benefits of grammar-translation with personal experience and observations gained in the classroom, has given rise to an eclectic approach to teaching vocabulary. Drawing on translation, this approach - which is presented in the following sections - can be used at all stages of FLT. Depending on the selected topics, texts and activities, it can also be purposefully employed in different areas of language teaching, including ESP. The paper tries to demonstrate, that, despite ESP being usually closely associated with the communicative approach, it can nevertheless make effective use of translation, particularly in obtaining specialised vocabulary.

### 3. Materials Selection

Vocabulary has always been very present in the classes I taught as a teaching assistant at the University of Maribor, Slovenia, be it as part of the general ELT

<sup>1</sup> <http://coerll.utexas.edu/methods/modules/vocabulary/02/lexical.php>

tutorials (English Language Development I and II taught to first and second year students) or specialised tutorials focusing on translation (Translation I, II and III taught to second and third year students). While the acquisition of vocabulary has already been a learning objective incorporated within the English Language Development syllabus, the need to further develop students' vocabulary as part of the Translation I, II and III has arisen from personal experience and the quest for natural language learning, as well as from students' positive responses to activities involving different vocabulary item-types. Guided vocabulary exercises have provided an answer to the problem that has repeatedly arisen during classes, namely: that, in terms of different lexical item-types used by the students - particularly polywords, collocations, and institutionalised utterances - much L2 text produced by them, while not formally breaching the rules of well-formedness, would be dismissed as "unnatural" by a native speaker.

The materials presented further herein were devised for the Translation II tutorials taught to third year students of Interlingual Mediation at Maribor University's Department of Translation Studies. In terms of materials selection, the syllabi of Translation II and III tutorials were co-ordinated to form an integral whole. The materials have been devised particularly to teach different functional styles<sup>2</sup> (text types) and their specifics at different levels: lexical, grammatical, syntactic and textual, in order that students are able to use them appropriately and effectively in both oral and written communication as well as in translation. The functional typology was selected because it was already familiar to the students from their previous education in L1 and allowed a fair comparison. It also allowed the teacher to incorporate, among other things, LSP texts associated with different communicative situations.

The main criterion for the selection of materials was their representativeness within a given text type, followed by naturalness of expression and overall correlation with the intended learning objectives. The materials were either located on-line or have formed a part of a previous professional translation assignment. In the particular case of the letter of invitation<sup>3</sup>, which will be presented in the continuation of the article (see also Appendix), the criterion of representativeness was satisfied by searching on-line for "sample" or "model" texts, and the search has indeed produced satisfactory results. The criterion of naturalness of expression was satisfied by selecting the texts which were devised or used by native speakers, as was also the case with this particular text (see footnote 4). Last, but not least, the text was also successful in meeting the general objectives of the lesson, which were to acquaint the students with this particular text in terms of broader text type conventions, the lexical item-types used (words, collocations, institutionalised utterances), and

<sup>2</sup> The functional styles (genres) are understood as types of texts with distinctive linguistic and stylistic characteristics, and are classified according to different communicative settings.

<sup>3</sup> This same letter is available at:

<http://businesscommunicationletters.blogspot.com/2007/04/invitations.html> (a website offering samples of English business correspondence), as well as  
[http://www.ecasd.k12.wi.us/faculty/shaslow/business\\_letters\\_and\\_logo\\_samples.pdf](http://www.ecasd.k12.wi.us/faculty/shaslow/business_letters_and_logo_samples.pdf) (a school in Wisconsin, USA), or <http://www.invitation-letter.com/samples/sample-business-accepting-invitation-letter.html> (a website focusing solely on different types of English invitation letters).

selected grammatical (sequence of adverbials) and punctuation issues (differences between American and British English punctuation in letters), as well as to produce in L2 a sample letter of invitation and a translation.

#### 4. Method

The text, a letter of invitation, was presented to students in the scope of an overall focus on business and diplomatic correspondence, constituting a part of the functional stylistic category of official documents. During the previous lesson, students had been presented with business letters and typical communicative situations where such letters are used, written and translated; and we continued with a related text. Much care was taken that students took a central role in the activities; the teacher's role should be limited to solely that of a guide and facilitator in the creation of a productive learning environment for pro-active students.

First, students were asked to read the text in English (L2), and, while reading, to focus on highlighted chunks of vocabulary<sup>4</sup>, reflect on them and find a way of expressing the same concept in Slovene (L1)<sup>5</sup>. They were not given a parallel text in L1 at this point of time because the task was aimed at activating their existing vocabulary, a goal which was achieved effectively. The subsequent discussion produced some more or less successful suggestions, which ranged from literal translations to fully functional equivalents capable of meeting the expectations of a Slovene native speaker.

**Please do not hesitate to contact us if you require any further information.**

Prosimo, kontaktirajte nas, če potrebujete še kakšne informacije.

Prosimo, pokličite nas, če želite dodatne informacije.

Za dodatne informacije smo vam na voljo.

Table 2: Examples of preliminary translation solutions

The selection of this particular text also promoted the discussion of selected aspects of L2 grammar, namely, the sequence of adverbials at the end of the sentence (manner, place, time) which usually differs in Slovene (where time is before place) and punctuation (American vs. British English punctuation, open punctuation, etc.). It should be added that vocabulary was addressed only to the extent in which it was relevant for the discussed text-type (closing/opening/keynote speaker, draft speaker programme, attendance, receive, inquiry/enquiry, etc.).

<sup>4</sup> Such institutionalized utterances would be frequently referred to as formalised or standardised expressions.

<sup>5</sup> Frequently, the students would be challenged by a question: »How would we put it?« or »How would they say...?« emphasizing the importance of native-like expression.

Next, students were presented with two sample texts in L2 and L1 for further reference as well as a list of "useful expressions" based on the examples provided in the textbook by M. Lipek (2002) discussing Slovene and English business and diplomatic correspondence. The list was partially blanked out and the students were asked to complete - in pairs or individually - the missing expressions in L2 or L1. If they were at loss for an answer, students could also refer to on-line resources. The list was collaboratively checked for solutions and possible inconsistencies, and students were encouraged to provide as many collocationally probable options as possible, this with the aim of diversifying their vocabulary while still striving for natural-like expression.

<b><i>Exercise 1: Fill in the missing translations into Slovene or English.</i></b>	
	Vljudno vas vabimo, da se udeležite slovesne podelitev priznanj v ...
	Zahvaljujemo se vam za povabilo in potrjujemo udeležbo na konferenci.
You are warmly/cordially/kindly invited to...	
It is a great pleasure to invite you...	

Table 3: Exercise 1 with examples of "useful expressions" (adapted from Lipek, 2002)

During their search for appropriate collocations, students were informed that they might resort to use of the on-line Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Students of English<sup>6</sup>, various English and/or Slovene corpora<sup>7</sup>, or they should execute on-line searches using site qualifiers (e.g. site:uk, or site:us) and search strings of words in quotation marks, with an asterisk (\*) marking the unknown term<sup>8</sup> ("You are \* invited to"). This option proved very effective, but requires awareness raising as to possible pitfalls, such as unreliable sites, idiosyncratic solutions, etc.

The next activity involved the use of a small number of larger lexical units, namely selected sentences translated into L2 by L1 speakers. These examples were taken from the book by A. McConnell Duff (2000). Students were asked to identify collocational and other possible errors made by the translator (e.g. faulty use of prepositions) or to rephrase the sentence in order that it remains as close to natural L2 expression as possible.

<sup>6</sup> <http://5yiso.appspot.com/search>

<sup>7</sup> e.g. BNC and COCA for English, and FidaPlus and Nova beseda for Slovene

<sup>8</sup> The asterisk or a star (\*) is a placeholder for any unknown item in a query and produces results based on the frequency of appearance of this item.

**Exercise 2: Identify collocational and possible other errors**

1. It was a great pleasure and honour to have the chance of working with you and the moments spent in your company are memorable to me.

*Possible solution (sentence as edited by a native speaker):* It was a great pleasure and honour to having had the chance/opportunity of working with you, and I retain warm/fond memories of the moments spent in your company.

2. I would like to congratulate you for the organization of this meeting and wish you a lot of success in the future.

*Possible solution (sentence as edited by a native speaker):* I would like to congratulate you on the organization of this meeting, and wish you much further success (in the future).

Table 4: Exercise 2 with examples of sentences to be corrected (adapted from Duff, 2000).

Next, in order to activate their productive knowledge, students were asked to write an invitation to a real-life event – a situation which they could encounter in their professional life. The text was selected on-line and care was taken that a real context was included.

**Exercise 3: Write a short invitation to the Conference described below****Conference »Roma in the European Union«**

Murska Sobota, 12 February 2010 – In Murska Sobota, Slovenia, an international conference on the situation of Roma in the EU was organized by the Roma Union of Slovenia. The participants discussed existing Roma legislation in Slovenia, topical problems of Roma communities in Europe and possible solutions for the improvement of their status in the framework of the EU, Council of Europe and OSCE.

Source: Permanent Representation of the Republic of Slovenia to the UN, OSCE and other International Organisations in Vienna

[http://vienna.representation.si/index.php?id=962&L=1&tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=4356&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=10&cHash=b01d36cabf](http://vienna.representation.si/index.php?id=962&L=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=4356&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=10&cHash=b01d36cabf)

Table 5: Exercise 3: A short informal invitation to the Conference

Finally, as a homework assignment, students were asked to use a dictionary to find frequent collocations with the following words: provisional, to invite, and speaker. The collocations could use the words literally or metaphorically and should involve different parts of speech combination (e.g. verb + noun, verb + adverb, adjective + noun, adverb + adjective, etc.). The submitted collocations were collected by the teacher and presented to them collectively during the next hour in the form of a mind map. As the final part of this class, students were asked to prepare a translation of the sample letter of invitation and submit it for evaluation.

## 5. Conclusions

The proposed FLT approach, with its focus on vocabulary, natural expression and bidirectional translation, is a step away from the monolingualism postulated by communicative language teaching. Despite having arisen from personal observations and classroom situations, it finds sound footing in the considerations of FLT theoreticians. Through a variety of carefully selected exercises, as well as through the use of authentic language and situations, this approach likewise promotes some of the core principles of communicative language teaching, namely authenticity and genuine context; whilst through its highlighting the central role of vocabulary in L2 acquisition it is supportive of lexical teaching. Lastly, but by no means least, this application re-evaluates the role of translation, which for too long - indeed, ever since the grammar-translation method was banned from FLT classrooms - has been out of favour with the foreign language teaching community.

On the basis of student feedback, and their success in exam situations, as well as from animated classroom discussions, such exercises have proven successful in promoting student knowledge as well as the attainment of set learning objectives. I am, however, aware that at present no concrete data exists which would scientifically corroborate my personal conclusions in any satisfactory manner. It is therefore my desire and intention to submit the proposed approach so that it may be further scrutinised by interested academicians and practitioners. I believe the approach described herein is universally applicable; it has been used with much success in translator training involving specialised texts, and it is my desire that it be implemented in further LSP and translator training contexts.

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## Appendix

August 15, 2006

Mr. Roger Morarity  
 Executive Director  
 Children With Disabilities Foundation  
 430 Smithson Drive, Suite 500  
 Chicago, IL 32956

**Dear Mr. Morarity:**

I would like to invite you, **on behalf of** the Board of Directors and **in my own name**, to be the closing keynote speaker at the upcoming 2006 IDCRI Conference.

The theme of this conference is "Disabling the Disability - Looking It Straight In the Eye". It will be held at the Mountain view Conference Facility, **in Montpelier, Vermont from December 3 to 5, 2006**.

**I would like to inform you** that Susan Crutchlow of Taming the Environment will be the opening keynote speaker. The provisional title of her presentation is "The Disabled Environment - Can We Help It?". We will forward a complete draft speaker program to you in a couple of weeks to give you an idea of the specific subjects that will be covered by the other speakers.

We expect attendance this year to be the highest ever; in the area of 2,000 delegates and 150 speakers. This includes a large contingent from our new European Chapter that is based in

Geneva. You may have heard that Dr. Walton Everinson will be presenting a major paper on his latest research into "Genetic ReEngineering". We are already receiving inquiries from all over the world about Dr. Everinson's presentation.

In closing, **we would be pleased and honored** if you would consent to be our closing speaker at the 2006 ICDRI Conference. **We look forward to seeing you** Vermont in December.

I will call you in a week or so **to follow up on this. Please do not hesitate to contact us if you require any further information.**

Yours sincerely,

Richard Bagnall  
Executive Director  
International Disabled Children Research Institute