TRANSLATION AND THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH

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1.- TRANSLATION

What we are trying to emphasize in this paper is using translation as a communicative language learning activity just as we may use project work, reading, drama, etc., for communicative language practice and improvement.

We would like to make clear that translation activities are not the only ones we suggest should be put into practice. As you may suppose this is just one among many other ways of teaching a foreign language within a Communicative Approach.

The use of translation will help teachers bring out, through suitable material, the most outstanding features of the source language (English) and mainly those which do not correspond with the target language (Spanish). It will also provide students with practice in translating a variety of styles and registers, a basis for interactive exchange, writing, investigation, exploration, etc. and a starting point for the use of different translation techniques.

2. THE ACTIVITY

Students of English are often required to translate in order to learn some partila aspects of the language but they are rarely given any practice in the skill. Moat material is often made up for the occasion or chosen specifically for their language traps. This is neither a way to learn the language nor a translation training activity. What is the point in giving the students a text to tranlate and returning it a week later with the errors marked in red?

Our approach goes a little further. The text handed out to them is not thought as an isolated, random activity but a regular opportunity to compare and discuss with others and to respond to suggestions.

2.1 Purpose of the activity

Apart from having it very clear, we should, from the very beginning, explain to our pupils why the translation activity is being done if we do not want them to feel frustrated - in fact this holds for all kinds of language activities.

Would a mature, sensible student accept a two hours' struggle over a text without knowing why he or she is doing it? Before assigning a text the teacher should have a clear idea of what the language focus is. Of course there is also room for cultural, social or historical message within the text. In the same way, we should give our students an introduction to the kind of material they will be working on. In order to be mentally prepared for the activity, they have to know that each exercise focuses attention on significant points of structure, vocabulary, idioms, word order, passive forms, etc.

Let us point out here that having in mind what the purpose of the text is, we could start by warming them up through oral activities connected with the specific lines drawn by the text itself.

2.2 Devising the activity

Communicative language teaching is based on the assumption that whatever language units or language forms a student comes across and grasps, she or he will make sense and use of them. Any meaningful and involving task in a teaching environment that suggests the use of English will activate utterances of some sort according to the individual kowledge of the language. Thus, when devising the activity we should take care in providing:

- systematic language inputs that make meaning.

- functions.

- the use of linguistic items clear and available for immediately forthcoming tasks.

This obviously requires a selection of themes, topics, text types, structures and stimulating activities that enable each learner to take part, as herself or himself, in meaningful interactive exchange, investigations and explorations.

Communicative foreign language learning is not the acquisition of "innumerable forms" but the mastery of well-selected graded objectives. Then, if we intend to make translation a communicative learning activity we will not only have to select the input of the texts but the possible activities that may surround them as well. These graded objectives (in spoken and written expression), skills and linguistic insights will enable the students to participate in the classroom activities suggested and elicited by the materials and the learning environment structured through different kinds of tasks.

As suggested by Piepho, following Breen and Candlin, let us suggest seven characteristics we should bear in mind when devising the translation activities:

1.- Can students identify in the material and share with other members of the group all the things they already know and can do in English?

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2.- Can the materials engage the students in stating, sharing and justifying the judgements they make, the values they hold and the attitudes they maintain concerning both the content and the procedures of the material?

3.- Can students communicate with the teacher and their fellow students about the subject they have in front of them? Can they do this also about the language learning process the materials support? Can students use language to share their sense as a means for collective action in the classroom?

4.- Can the materials provide for and enable students to choose alternative content on which to choose?

5.- Can students choose different routes for their work in the materials, towards perhaps a common objective? Can they adopt their preferred ways of working? Can the materials be made to provide alternatives and involve students in considering which to choose?

6.- Can the materials involve students in negotiation, problem-solving, investigating their own learning, analysing data and evaluating their performance at these tasks? In short, can the materials encourage the decision making process for establishing and carrying out the work in the classroom? Can they do so while enabling teachers and students to work together?

7.- Can the materials encourage the evaluation of:

- the outcomes of the group tasks in terms of their characteristics.

- the appropriateness of the materials in relation to the students' aims choices and preferences within the materials?

The translation activity itself is task-based consisting of different tasks related to the text to be translated. In other words, the "translation" will be the final stage (we can also consider it the final product) but before getting to it, teacher and students will have to go through different stages, tasks or activities (all of them of the same importance).

Such activities or tasks together with the translation of the text itself may be boring, wasteful or unproductive if we do not follow certain basic steps and principles in devising them. Making use of some steps proposed by Piepho, we suggest the following:

A - Advanced organizing - (text or texts)

When choosing the text we should satisfy the two requirements implicit in the idea of translation as a language learning activity. Fisrtly, it should provide the teacher with material directly relevant to the study of English in general and, in particular, to language practice through the medium of pre-translation and translation activities.

Secondly, it should illustrate the most common basic principles, problems, challenges and strategies of translation in general.

Among others, we should take into account the following considerations before choosing the material for a whole period or academic year:

- It should represent customary usage in both written and spoken language.

- It should cover the full range of styles and registers.

- It should be general rather than specialized.

- It should be easy to understand.

- It should be interesting.

- It should be possible for he students to translat at their level.

B - Teacher's stimuli - Predetermined questions.

- What do we know about the theme or topic in the text?

- What makes us stop and think?

- What does not seem interesting at first glance?

- How do we feel or what do we think about the item?

- Where has it been taken from?

- What language and presentation skills do I need to practice and study?

- What is the vocabulary like? What is it typical of?

- How can I get more information on the topic, the structures, vocabulary, etc.?

- What has it got to do with my life, my interests, my hobbies?

Potential activities.

- Brainstorming.

- Warm-ups: Context clues, matching pairs, finding alternatives transformations, odd man out, filling the gaps, etc.

- Collecting and arranging in clusters all the words and ideas that come to our minds.

- Finding out which of your friends have similar ideas and preferences to yours.

- Deciding what you will do to collect more information.

- Guessing unknown words or stuctures.

- Comparing words or stuctures.

- Deciding how to put your ideas and findings in writing or into tables or graphs.

C - Students' response -

- **Tasks** - writing ideas and comments on slips of paper.

  - Checking the language or having it checked.

  - Using pictures from magazines.

  - Collecting texts.

  - Interviewing people.

  - Acting, etc.

- **Activities** - negotiating.

  - gathering.

  - note-making.

  - drafting, etc.

- **Results** - Posters, wallpaper texts, slogans, catchwords, inspecting or writing brochures, library, videotheque and tape collection, tape-interviews, photos, role plays, etcétera.

D - Translation

- Individual or group work. (Discussion in groups about the main idea of the text, the style, the tone, the meaning of certain words - this can be done in Spanish - etc.

- Produce a first draft of the translation and put each group's version in common with the others'.

- Discuss the different versions and try to get a final product everybody agrees with.

- Using the same topic or a similar one try to write a text containing paralell ideas, structures, style, tenses and so on.

Relevant principles which should be emphasized :

Meaning - Is the meaning clear and accurate?

  - Has anything been arbitrarily added?

  - Does it sound natural or forced?

Form - The ordering of words and ideas in the translation matches the original?

- Does Spanish require a change in the form or order of words?

Register - Has the translation the same tone the writer or speaker set?

Influence - Does the translation sound natural?

- Is it moulded by the original text?

Style - Has it got the same style as the original?

Idioms - Are there untranslatable idiomatic expressions?

- Use of inverted commas, literal explanations literal explanations.

E - Evaluation

- Was the topic interesting? Why? Why not?

- How did the tasks, activities, translation... work out?

- Which were effective/ineffective?

- Were there any specific language problems?

- Have we solved them?

- Which of the resources were particularly useful?

- What could be improved?

- Have I really improved? Am I conscious of it?

- Do I need more linguistic input?

- Were the books, textbooks, workbooks, dictionaries, etc. a satisfactory help?

CONCLUSION

The main idea behind this paper is that translation, as a communicative language learning activity, is both possible and useful but only if we have in mind that the translation itself is just an excuse to teach and learn the language. In a well pre-planned lesson or sets of lessons, the teacher will encourage the students with motivating tasks and activities that will inevitably lead to a final translation exercise for which our pupils should have been thoroughly prepared both linguistically and psychologically.

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