Supporting Learner Reflection in the Language Translation Class

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ABSTRACT

In a case study a University class undertook a translation from Swedish to English in a keystroke logging environment and then replayed their translations in pairs while discussing their thought processes when undertaking the translations, and why they made particular choices and changes to their translations. Computer keystroke logging coupled with peer-based intervention assisted the students in discussing how they worked with their translations, and enabled them to see how their ideas relating to the translation developed as they worked with the text. The process showed that Computer Keystroke logging coupled with peer-based intervention has potential to (1) support student reflection and discussion around their translation tasks, and (2) enhance student motivation and enthusiasm for translation. [Article copies are available for purchase from InfoSci-on-Demand.com]

Keywords: Awareness; Keystroke Logging; Observational Learning; Peer-Based Intervention; Readiness; Reflection; Translation

INTRODUCTION

Many language teachers use translation exercises as part of their teaching repertoire. Historically, translation has played a central role in language teaching and examination as part of the Grammar-Translation Method. Although widely
criticized over the past 20 years or so on the grounds that it places the focus on language as a formal system of rules rather than on language for communication (see, for example, Levefere & Bassnett, 1998), translation is still an integral part of many language courses in school and university. For example, in a survey of the 22 universities in Swedish teaching English as a Foreign Language, only 5 made no explicit mention of translation in their course syllabi (Deutschmann, Lindgren, Steinvall, & Sullivan, 2005). In many departments, the traditional translation class in a language course has changed little, if at all, over the years. Typically, the students are given the text they are to translate into, or out of, the foreign language prior to the class. The students then translate the text with the help of dictionaries and grammar books before the class. During the class the teacher discusses the translation, often sentence-by-sentence and student-by-student. The translations are compared and in some classes an ideal translation is presented to the class.

Translation as a language teaching method focuses on the end result rather than the process involved getting there. However, the ability to focus not only on the ‘what’ but also the ‘how’ and the ‘why’ is seen by many as an essential skill for life long learning in the current socio-economic climate (Pickering, 2005). In the traditional translation classroom the correct answer is rewarded rather than the process leading up to it. Further, there is rarely any discussion beyond how to correct the errors the student presenting their part of the translation has made. The underlying reasons for a correct or incorrect sentence are never accessed. The problems associated with the method and the need for alternative approaches have been pointed out by several authors (e.g. Kussmaul, 1995; Nott, 2005; Hubscher-Davidson, 2007) and is further illustrated in the following quote:

As a classroom exercise, or when returning students’ written translations, it gave ample opportunity for teachers to demonstrate their superiority, and for students to be convinced of their inferiority, as translators. This double deception was made possible by maintaining the illusion that there was ‘out there’ a single, complete, ideal version, which they had struggled unsuccessfully to achieve. (Nott, 2005 ¶1)

The traditional translation method is teacher, rather than learner, focused. It is the teacher who chooses the text, who holds the correct answers and who directs the classroom activity. The agenda for the lesson is set by the text chosen, which may be far from optimal for the individual learner, and thus results in a lack of individualisation of feedback. Different students have different problems; some students may find the problems addressed trivial, whereas others may struggle to understand the concepts discussed. Few translation classes are able to individualise the class so that the passages for translation
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