



## Should we bring back translation?

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In the closing ceremony of the recent JALT (2014) national conference in Tsukuba, the four plenary speakers were invited to give some final comments to the audience. One of them was particularly noteworthy; Claire Kramersch commented that we should consider bringing back translation.

The reason this struck me was that my colleague Shirley Leane, from Tottori University, and I had just given a presentation earlier that afternoon which highlighted some of the weaknesses in the translation method of teaching English in Japan. This traditional method of teaching involves translating English to Japanese from right to left, which is often necessitated because of the contrasting word order of English and Japanese.

### The appeal of extensive reading

Firstly, I will explain my views of English to Japanese translation as a pedagogical tool, in the context of extensive reading and listening. Day and Bamford's (1998) contrast of extensive and intensive reading is particularly impressive, so I have regularly presented over the last few years it to the students in my English teacher trainee class.

This chart will of course be familiar to other extensive reading and listening practitioners, and it has informed my teaching since I first encountered it. Extensive reading is radical in the Japanese EFL context because it stands in striking contrast to the traditional *yakudoku* ("Translate and Read") approach, which tends to conform to the intensive reading approach outlined above.

One of the reasons I was attracted to extensive reading and listening was that I had observed the mental struggle of my students when responding to me in English, and I speculated that this was because of the preponderance of the *yakudoku* method in their formative years of learning English. *Yakudoku* aims to provide an accurate rendering of the text in Japanese, and therefore does not fulfil one of the aims of extensive reading, "making meaning directly from a text without translation" (Day & Bamford, 1998: 120). I assumed that my students had not made meaning directly from either written or spoken text without translation, and therefore I embarked on an extensive reading and listening programme, hoping to help them make this transition.

Translation is not an intrinsically unhelpful teaching methodology.

Indeed, in the case of languages which map more closely onto each other, such as languages with similar word orders, translation cannot be considered an impediment to developing inner speech in the L2. English speakers speaking L2 French can positively transfer some of the vocabulary, verb tenses and word orders from their L1. Arguably, they may retain their inner speech in the L1 without it obstructing the L2.

The reason I consider translation from English to Japanese to be particularly unhelpful for Japanese learners of English is that it may involve the process of *kaeriyomi* (Kato, 2006), that is, reading from right to left. This is necessitated because of the contrasting word order of English and Japanese. Even Japanese relative clauses and the position of prepositions are in contrast with those of English. Japanese relative clauses are left branching with the noun placed at the end of the clause, whereas English relative clauses feature the noun at the beginning (Kuno, 1974, cited in Odlin, 1989). Japanese has post-positions and English has prepositions. In many important ways the word orders of Japanese and English are dissimilar. Nobetsu (2012) examined the frequency of reading from right to left, and found that it is still commonly

Intensive	Type of Reading	Extensive
Read accurately	Class goal	Read fluently
Translate	Reading purpose	Get information
Answer questions		Enjoy
Words and pronunciation	Focus	Meaning
Often difficult	Material	Easy
Teacher chooses		You choose
Not much	Amount	A lot
Slower	Speed	Faster
Must finish	Method	Stop if you don't like it
Use dictionary		No dictionary"

(Day & Bamford, 1998: 123)

practised in certain contexts such as in preparation for university entrance exams.

### Countering arguments in defence of translation

When I discussed Claire Kramersch's comment about bringing back translation with my co-presenter Shirley Leane, Shirley said that she was not sure that translation had ever left. As I write I am in the process of helping an undergraduate prepare for graduate school at a prestigious university. This which involves translation of a text of considerable lexico-grammatical density from English to Japanese. The task conforms to the features of intensive reading listed in Day and Bamford's (1998) chart above, so indeed it appears that translation is still indeed required for gate-keeping examinations in Japan.

As Claire Kramersch suggests, translation can still be considered a useful pedagogical activity. Indeed, multiple advantages of translation have been identified by Cook (2010). Nevertheless, I will suggest reasons why these reasons may not be applicable in the Japanese EFL context.

It relates languages to each other, rather than leaving them to operate in separate compartments, and is thus very much in tune with global communication. (Cook, 2010: 43)

Relating Japanese to English is more of an exercise in contrast than comparison. It may be helpful for speakers of distant languages such as English and Japanese to let them operate in separate compartments.

For many students the conundrums of translation provide a satisfying intellectual challenge (along the lines of popular pastimes such as Sudoku, crosswords or chess) and aesthetic satisfaction, in that it involves the crafting of a complex artefact. (121)

This is likely to only be experienced by the most able students. Extensive reading, in contrast, has the pleasure of reading as one of its explicit aims. Extensive reading, rather than translation, is likely to be a source of pleasure for a wide cross-section of students.

"Form-focused close translation . . . prevents students from simply bypassing difficulties and gaps in their knowledge." (p.136)

Form-focused translation of English to Japanese may not be particularly helpful because of the lack of equivalence between distant languages. Rather than finding Japanese equivalents of English, time would be better spent exploring new meanings that are typically not present in the L1. This of course does not mean that the use of the L1 is to be discouraged, because the L1 can be exploited to rapidly provide critical information about the L2. It is the painstaking process of translation, rather than use of the L1, which I consider unhelpful in compulsory English classes.

Accordingly, I feel that translation between English and Japanese is of limited value in language classes. Translation may have advantages for similar languages because it can aid students to harness positive transfer of related lexico-grammar. However, in the Japanese EFL context, translation is undesirable. This is principally because the process of parsing English from right to left in order to approximate the Japanese word order takes attention away from the task of processing English in its natural order, which is important if we want to foster listening.

Translation may be a useful exercise in some foreign language classrooms, and for those who wish to become professional translators. However it has traditionally been overused in Japanese EFL compulsory classes, and the radically different approach of extensive reading deserves more prominence.

### References

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