Translation and Cultural Transfer in Foreign Languages Acquisition: Literature and Mother Tongue in Focus

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Abstract

Foreign languages acquisition has always been an issue of interest for linguistics and didactics professionals. As far as the processes of making non-native speakers master a language are concerned, translation remains an inevitable channel at the gate of which culture prevails. Indeed, if the acquisition of a foreign language is a translation-based task, to what extent will translation contribute in the transfer of that foreign language culture? And how would the transferred culture literature consolidate the learner's acquisition of that foreign language? In this regard, this article attempts to examine, through a survey, some concrete examples of the role culture plays in the transfer of language skills between Arabic and English. It would moreover check the impact of the mother tongue (and its culture) on the behavior of the learner on the one hand, and on his oral and written expression on the other hand.

Keywords: foreign languages acquisition – linguistics – didactics – translation – cultural transfer – mother tongue – literature

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مُلخّص المَقَال

لَطَالَمَا كَانَ اكْتِسَابُ اللُّغَةِ الأَجْنَبِيَّةِ مَرْكَزَ اهْتِمَامِ اللِّسَانِيِّينَ عَلَى العُمُومِ، وَالمُهْتَمِّينَ بِتَعْلِيمِيَّةِ اللُّغَاتِ عَلَى وَجْهِ الخُصُوص. وَكَثِيرًا مَا اعْتَمَدَ هَؤُلَاء وَغَيْرِهِمْ مِنْ مُعَلِّمِي اللُّغَاتِ الأَجْنَبِيَّة عَلَى التَّرْجَمَة فِي عَمَلِيَّة تَلْقِينِ المُتَحَدِّثِينَ غَيْرَ الأَصْلِيِّينَ لُغَةً أَجْنَبِيَّةً مَا. فَالتَّرْجَمَةُ لاَ تَزَالُ وَسِيلَةً ضَرُورِيَّةً لِتَعْلِيمِ اللُّغَةِ الأَجْنَبِيَّة، وَعِنْدَ الحَدِيثِ عَنْ هَذِهِ الأَخِيرَةِ لاَ بُدَّ أَنْ نَعُودَ إِلَى الثَّقَافَةِ الَّتِي تَلْعَبُ دَوْرًا أَسَاسِيًّا فِي تَعَلُّمِها. فَإِذَا اعْتَمَدْنَا التَّرْجَمَةَ كَوَسِيلَة لِذَلِكَ، فَإِلَى أَيِّ مَدَى قَدْ تُسْهِمُ فِي نَقْلِ ثَقَافَةِ هَذِه اللُّغَةِ الأَجْنَبِيّة؟ وَكَيْفَ يُعَزِّزُ أَدَبُ الثَّقَافَة المَنْقُولَة عَمَلِيَّةَ اكْتِسَابِ المُتَعَلِّمِ تِلْكَ اللُّغَة الأَجْنَبِيَّة؟ فِي هَذَا الصَّدَدِ، يُعَالِجُ هَذَا المَقَالُ –مِنْ خِلاَلِ دِرَاسَةٍ مَيْدَانِيّة– بَعْضَ الأَمْثِلَةِ المَلْمُوسَةِ للدَّوْرِ الَّذِي تَلْعَبُهُ الثَّقَافَةُ فِي نَقْلِ المَهَارَاتِ اللُّغَوِيّة بَيْنَ اللُّغَتَيْنِ العَرَبِيَّة والإنْجِلِيزِيّة. كَمَا سَيَنْظُرُ فِي كَيْفِيّة تَأْثِيرِ اللُّغَةِ الأُمّ وَثَقَافَتِهَا عَلَى سُلُوكِ المُتَعَلِّم مِنْ جِهَة، وَعَلَى تَعْبِيرِهِ الشَّفَهِيِّ وَالكِتَابِيِّ مِنْ جِهَةٍ أُخْرَى.

Introduction

Translation has long been one of the most used methods in teaching foreign languages. Yet, it has been the nucleus of several controversies. So to what extent can translation be a suitable process in foreign languages acquisition? It is admitted that by the beginning of the twentieth century, critics reached translation the fact that it was close to grammar translation method. Moreover, it was considered as being suitable within the context of foreign language learning (Brown, 2002). Ever since, with the emergence of what became to be known as the communicative turn and the adoption of the communicative approach to language teaching, translation has gradually lost importance as a teaching tool (Tsagari & Floros, 2013).

Since decades, translation has become part of the communicative English language classroom approach and still provokes strong opinions in an area of controversies. However, teachers tend to revive the use of translation in teaching foreign languages for many reasons. They regard translation as necessary as reading and grammar exercises. They "are in fact perceived by learners to be conductive to learning". In this respect, translation tends to emerge again as an effective tool since it "plays a very important role in an increasingly globalised world" (Leonardi, 2010, 17).

The present study grew out of a teaching practice of English as a foreign language to students graduating in translation through a translation-based process. Many observations have been made on the ways students write English and how their culture –far from being English- impacts their ideas through their writings.

The *problem* discussed in this article is about the degree of influence of the mother tongue culture on the thoughts of learners of English as a foreign language, and how translation DOES play a role in the transfer of the foreign language culture. In other words, the research aims at showing the impact of translation on the practice and improvement of a foreign language learning on the one hand, and discussing some issues related to the use of the culture of a language in the language of another culture on the other hand.

As far as the *objectives* of the research are concerned, it is fair enough to describe some of the cultural features transmitted from Arabic (as a culture) to English (as a language), and provide evidence that translation offers specific practical methods used in order to transfer certain expressions through behaviors.

The study consists of two parts: a theoretical part and an empirical one. The theoretical part provides background information about translation as a teaching process. It also describes cultural transfer as it is in focus in this teaching/learning foreign languages process. As far as the empirical part is concerned, it is about the implementation of two language activities

in different contexts, translation being a part of this implementation, where culture seems to be somehow different in both languages. Finally it will discuss the results of the survey conducted with students graduating in translation.

1. Theoretical Background

As an academic discipline, translation has witnessed vast changes through the three past decades. As a profession, in a more accurate point of view, there is a serious call for a reassessment of the role of translation in language teaching. This section provides a background of the process of teaching by the means of translation, and its objectives and the main fields of its practice. This section also investigates the emergence of the cultural transfer concept and its main language-related aspects.

1.1 Translation-based teaching process

Scholars over history collected enough data to defend the use of translation as a pedagogical tool. Yet, it didn't yet acquire the status of a scientific method. In what follows is a description of the objectives of translation which proved to be effective at many stages of its practice.

1.1.1 Historical background

The attempt to learn a foreign language is as old as history. Translation as a method was initiated in Greece and Rome to learn each other's classical languages. The aim of the translation method then "was to know everything about anything more than the thing itself." (Richards & Rogers, 2001). Consequently, translation emerged as a method of teaching when language teaching came into its own as a profession requiring distinct and new methods in the twentieth century. The beginning of this century witnessed the design of the major teaching methods and materials. But the quest for better methods has long been the preoccupation of linguists.

From a historical perspective, it is admitted that foreign language learning has been an outstanding historical concern which urged modern methods innovation. Across various educational contexts, both in space and time, translation played an important role not only in teaching and learning foreign languages, but also in language competence assessment. Gradually, with the emergence of new methods, translation became less and less important because of many reasons. Malmkjaer summarizes them in the following points:

- Translation is independent and radically different from the four skills which define language competence: reading, writing, speaking and listening.
- Translation takes up valuable time which could be used to teach these four skills.
- Translation misleads and prevents students from thinking in the foreign language.
- Translation produces interference.
- Translation is only appropriate for training translators. (Malmkjaer, 1998, 6)

Actually, considering translation as a common attempt to find lexical and structural correspondences among L1 and L2 is what has been decried by language teachers. Duff (1994) admits that if introducing translation as a process has been rejected, it is because translation is text bound and confined only to reading and writing. It doesn't involve oral interaction and thus lacks communication and calls the mother tongue back at times. However, the advance of research on translation has offered language teaching a new profile, a confident one, to reinstate translation as a tool for teaching foreign languages.

1.1.2 Translation-based teaching process objectives

There had been "significant and visible signs of a revival of translation in language teaching according to recent literature and applied linguistics." (Malmkjaer, 1998, 1). Translation has become an important technique in foreign languages classes since it improves verbal agility, and expands students' vocabulary in L2. The structures of this latter are consolidated for active use; the style is then developed. Schaffner (1998) also claims that translation and related exercises could be beneficial to foreign language learning since they improve comprehension in L2, and the manner languages work will be clearer for the learners. In this optimistic context, the relevance of translation may be perceived to enhance the four main skills, and to develop accuracy, clarity and flexibility (Duff, 1989, 7). Duff also argues that translation happens everywhere and all the time since students translate to each other and interpret signs, notices and instructions. They will therefore translate ideas from their mother tongue into English (Duff, 1994).

1.1.3 Translation-based teaching process practices

Translation as a pedagogical tool grew controversial when it came to its implementation. O'Malley and Chamot (1990, 127), when investigating learning strategies employed by learners, asserted that translation accounted for over a third of strategies used. As for the stages of learning, beginner learners would mostly rely on repetition, translation and transfer. More advanced students resort to inference yet without abandoning familiar strategies such as repetition and translation (Mbeudeu, 2017). In this respect, Newmark sets different combinations for translation use in foreign language teaching: he considers translation from L1 to L2 in initial stages of language teaching as a brief time saver and a sort of insurance that pupils are not guessing the wrong meaning. In elementary stages, translation from L1 to L2 may be useful as a form of control and consolidation of basic grammar and vocabulary. In the middle stages, Newmark inverses the translation combination to say that when dealing with errors, translation from L2 to L1 may be useful. (Newmark, 1991, 61).

One of the obvious objectives of translation is to improve communication. Ross (2000) considers that translation involves interaction and cooperation between people, which makes it a very useful tool in foreign language teaching. This is clearly perceived in

the advanced or final stage of language teaching. Newmark asserts that translation from L1 to L2 and from L2 to L1 is recognized as the fifth skill since it promotes communication and understanding between strangers. (Newmark, 1991, 62).

To summarize, translation as a means of teaching/learning a foreign language emerged in ancient Greece and Rome. It witnessed a decline when new methods were made into practice. However, in the recent decades, there is a strong call for it in the communicative turn of teaching foreign languages methods since it proved effective in enhancing verbal interaction among people of different languages and cultures. Consequently, cultural transfer through translation is inevitable.

1.2 Cultural Transfer

Starting basically from the communicative characteristic of translation-based teaching process, cultural transfer is inevitable to occur, at any stage of its implementation. This section will introduce the concept, how it emerged and its major aspects in both surface and deep structures.

1.2.1 The Emergence of the Concept

The concept of cultural transfer first emerged in 1985 with the creation of the research group called "Transferts Culturels Franco-Allemands". Michel Espagne is one of the founders, among philosophers and historians. The early landmark of the concept is culture which is that accumulation of common values; it is "the way of life and its manifestations that are peculiar to a community that uses a particular language as its means of expression" (Newmark, 1998, 94). Therefore, culture and language are bound, and so is communication. Samovar & al. admit that:

> *" Culture and communication are inseparable because culture not only dictates who talks to whom, about what, and how the communication proceeds; it also helps to determine how people encode messages, the meanings they have for massages, and the conditions and circumstances under which various massages may or may not be sent, noticed, or interpreted ..."* (Samovar & al, 1991)

It is worth mentioning that language is not only the product of culture, it is also the symbol of culture; the development of a language frequently affects its associated culture (Gleason, 1961). It should be admitted in this respect that culture and language are both bound to the social structure of people. In other words, culture is melted in the language of a society and language designs the culture of that society.

Being a powerful tool for social development, culture is transferred through language to new generations to move through time; and to different people at a time to move through space. Culture becomes then "a system of values, beliefs and/or norms among a group of people" (Greey, 1994). As far as the transfer of culture is concerned, it is mainly caused by cultural difference. When people of different cultures use language to communicate, the values of their own language are transferred; their thoughts go through their words to feel the difference from others. Cross cultural communication can thus face a barrier because of the language or the behavior.

1.2.2 Aspects of Cultural Transfer

Scholars in linguistics and sociology made it clear that cultural transfer is in two forms: Surface-structure transfer and deep-structure transfer.

1.2.2.1 Surface-structure transfer

Surface-structure transfer discusses the absence of corresponding words from one language to the other, whether the words are not so easy to explain, or because of their strong historical or social implications (Melinte, 2012, 61). Additionally, language is made rich with idioms and proverbs that are stuck to ancient legends and can be understood by a population of a common culture. Likewise, the figures of speech may be among the most distinguishing items of a language style; and they are likely to be difficult to be transferred and translated.

1.2.2.1 Deep-structure transfer

Deep-structure transfer happens rather on the psychological level. Culture values may appear in understanding or misunderstanding while communicating. In other words, terms, phrases and sentences -even conveying the same meaning- their volume, rate, intonation and emphasis may produce a different referent in the interlocutors' mind. We come to agree that cultural transfer is enhanced by communication. Exchanging ideas is first and foremost the starting point of communication among people of different cultures. Language, that deeply rooted linking element, manifested in translation, remains the most important channel for cultural transfer, whether at surface or deep levels.

As far as translation is concerned, it encounters some obstacles, most of which are moral filters based on religious beliefs, family principles, social rules and specific audience. When the objective is to make culture universal, or to get acquainted with cultural and religious customs, the role of translation becomes vital.

In a nutshell, culture is a sum of many elements: people, language, behavior, feelings, customs …etc. Different thoughts, beliefs and perspectives are brought about by the use of different forms of language; translation seems to be the only way to ensure that cultural transfer manifested mostly in the intention to understand and to be understood.

2. Empirical study

Many cultural items such as habits and locutions of both English and Arabic are quite different. What are the features of any potential transfer, and what are the means of acquiring the correct equivalent of a mother tongue thought or behavior in the foreign language culture are the main questions set for the present research.

2.1 Methodology

The survey goes through the following four steps: subjects and context selection, data collection, analysis procedure, results and discussions.

2.1.1 Subject and Context

English as a foreign language is taught in the Institute of Translation at the University of Algiers since decades. The survey was conducted with students at the Institute of translation University of Algiers II. These students have been learning English since middle school. The participants belong to two different categories:

Category A: First year graduation students at The Institute of Translation (University of Algiers II, Abou Alkacem Saadallah), graduating in a five-year Arabic-French-English cycle to get a master degree in translation or interpretation. The number of participants is ten, males and females, aged between 18 and 20. They were randomly chosen, with no regard to their present level or previous results in English. Yet, it's worth mentioning that they all got an "A" degree (Baccalaureat) from public high schools in Algeria.

Category B: First year master students at The Institute of Translation (University of Algiers II Abou Alkacem Saadallah). They are preparing a master degree in Arabic-English translation in a two-year cycle. The number of participants is ten, males and females, aged between 23 and 26. These students already graduated in English language: in literature or civilization (American, British or African), didactics or linguistics. They came from departments of English of different universities in Algeria.

As far as the context is concerned, the twenty students had already started studying the module of translation studies three months before the beginning of the survey. It was the first time they had translation class. As a matter of fact, I started conducting the survey by mid-January 2018 to last six weeks. All the selected students were invited to meet once a week, in my presence, for a two-hour discussion on various topics and issues related to English learning and Arabic-English translation practices.

2.1.2 Selected Data

After three weeks, accumulating six hours of discussions, the students had to submit, in the classroom and in 30 minutes, a paragraph of no more than eighty words, in which they would describe the different greeting manners they know. Three weeks later, they had to translate a series of five idiomatic expressions from Arabic into English. During all the meetings, accumulating twelve hours of common oral conversations, there was no access to Internet, nor did the students talk in a language different from English.

2.1.3 Analysis Procedure

The method employed in the analysis was qualitative aiming at having clear evidence of the impact of mother tongue culture on the students' written English expression and translation from Arabic into English. As part of the analysis, l selected a student's work from each of the aforementioned categories and the two suggested tasks.

2.2 Results and Discussion

Task one, which was was about greetings, seemed acceptable for the students. They found greeting a usual manner depending on the person to be greeted. The paragraphs below clearly show the different ways students see 'greeting'.

Table 1. Students' Greeting People Paragraphs

Task One: Greeting People	
Student from A category paragraph	Student from B category paragraph
When we meet people for the first time, we express our happiness and say "Nice to meet you". But if we meet people regularly, we can shake hands or kiss them or even wave to them. As Muslims, we generally say "Salamu Alaykum among men" but women kiss and hug.	*Greeting is a social behavior expressed with a smile, a handshake or a kiss. The culture of people decides about the way to greet each other. Muslims tend to shake hands among man and exchange kisses among women. In the West, norms depend on countries, social class and the relationships among people. In the past, men used to bow and kiss women's hands as seen in movies or described in western literature.*

Both paragraphs have been written in the allowed time. The first year graduation student (Category A) seems to produce a very limited version of greeting. He distinguishes

first meeting greeting from regular one but tends to detail the Muslims' culture through greeting. He also uses the pronoun 'we' instead of 'I' as evidence of a group-oriented thinking. The master student (Category B) tends to present a relatively well-displayed knowledge as he provides a short definition of greeting (social behavior), presents its gestures (smile, handshake, kiss), illustrates the role of culture in the gesture itself (Muslims versus Western), and draws a comparison with the gestures of greetings used in the past and mentioned the source of the information (movies, literature).

It is also well-noticed that the Muslim culture, being the culture of the mother tongue in the country (Arabic), is present in both paragraphs. Yet, the first student declares that he is Muslim and the second describes Muslims with no reference to his beliefs. In a word, the impact of culture is visible but in different degrees. It is worth adding that the student who previously studied literature had already an idea about men bowing to women as a way for greeting people. His prior readings of western literature called for the idea he got about greeting in the West. Thus, the way he tackles the first task proves the transfer of the Western culture to the advanced English language learner through reading British, American and African literature and civilization.

Task two was about translating five idioms or idiomatic expressions. The idioms I selected were related to colors and/or to the human body. All the students expressed the importance of knowing the meaning of idioms and how important they were in daily life expression.

Table 2. Idioms Translation from Arabic to English

Task two: Translating idioms		
Idiom in English	Student from category A Translation into Arabic	Student from category B Translation into Arabic
My knee was **black and blue** after my bicycle fall off	اصطبغت ركبتي بالأسود والأزرق لمّا سقطت عن درّاجتي	اشتدّ الألم بِرُكبتي عندم سقوطي من دراجتي
The man was caught **red-handed**	قبضوا على الرّجل ويده حمراء (بدم الجريمة)	قُبض على الرّجل متلبسا
My grandmother had **a green thumb**	لجدّتي يد خضراء	ضليعة جدّتي بالتّشجير والعناية بالنّباتات
When young, I usually saw the university with **rose colored glasses**	كثيرا ما رأيت الجامعة بنظّارتي الزهرية	رؤيتي للجامعة لم تكن واقعيّة في صغري

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When in the **red**, she used to sell her jewels	اعتادت على بيع مجوهراتها في حالة الخطر	لمّا تزيد ديونها تبيع مجوهراتها

According to the answers of both categories of students, one can say that literal translation method proved predominant in A category student's translation, which clearly confirms the cultural gap between Arabic and English at this level. Not only he literally translated the idioms, but also showed French present culture traces in the third idiom translation to say 'avoir la main verte' which means 'to be good at planting'. The surface structure level already proved present when dealing with idiomatic expressions at the lexical level. The different cultural backgrounds dictate therefore different suggestions when translating, for the usage of idioms in general, and color idioms in particular should be compulsory within the culture of the target language.

One can admit then that it is really a difficult task for translators lacking mastery of foreign language culture to translate idioms or idiomatic expressions, knowing that with colors or not, an idiom remains a specificity of a language and its culture.

Conclusion

Although the present article is just a survey over the controversy of English language acquisition and the role of translation in teaching English particularly in future translators' classroom at university level, it showed, even with only two tasks, that translation remains crucial when it comes to the transfer of cultural aspects. The survey outcomes may also be taken as evidence that a literary background is quite helpful to learn both a language and about that language as it is used as a reference about the traditions and customs of the foreign language people. It also showed the impact of mother tongue culture on the result of the translation process. This latter can be a scope for teachers to exploit targeted translation within various contexts. It is no surprise that overuse of translation may be harmful to learning. Yet, it is agreed that when it comes to deal with learning to speak and write a foreign language, little translation may also disadvantage learning.

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