

## TRANSLATION AS A COMMUNICATIVE ACTIVITY IN TEACHING TECHNICAL ENGLISH

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**Abstract:** This paper intends to demonstrate that translation combines both form and meaning, both proficiency and performance. Due to this aspect, we can say that translation is an ideal exercise in a language teaching environment, supporting, as a consequence, the communicative method to compensate for its failure to concentrate on form, despite the fact that it remains a communicative activity by definition. It will also be determined that engineering students use translation so as to be able to manage the new information in technical field while also considering that it simplifies their learning.

**Keywords:** vocabulary, foreign, acquisition, methods, experience

### 1. Introduction

In the process of teaching and learning, there are many difficulties in trying to use the new vocabulary in communication assignments, but there are many methods that we, as teachers, can use nowadays, especially when we teach technical English. What is important, however, is that the teachers should always be aware of the interests and needs of the students in order to gain success with the newly introduced words and structures in order to help the students understand that these are useful for them to use in the future in communication. The present paper intends to present concrete teaching practices, limited to both vocabulary work and to communicative activities.

I shall start my paper by referring to the learning difficulties in using the foreign vocabulary and by bringing arguments to my outcomes that these difficulties are normal. This aspect should be discussed with the students, because learning the vocabulary also involves dealing with certain difficulties in the structure of the language. Teachers of foreign languages know that new words are difficult for students to learn and the best way of introducing them in a new lecture should be in different contexts in which it would be easy for students to understand their meanings. Rainer Bohn estimates that there are different premises for this situation:

- we belong to different types of learners and have different interests, our emotions shape our lives very much, so learning is an individual process.
- in the process of learning a foreign language we have different experiences; in order to teach certain learning strategies it is not important whether we learn a first, second or even third foreign language.
- we find some languages easier to learn, others harder to learn
- the term *word* itself: the variety of vocabulary represents an appropriate occasion to think of content words, functional words, synonyms or phrases.

What are, actually, the difficulties that teaching technical English points out? In this context, many teachers also highlight the adaptation of the teaching methods to

the characteristics of the students, the techniques of differentiation as permanent working techniques and the activation of the learners in the process of intellectual appropriation. But it depends only on the teacher whether these theoretical and helpful features are also put into practice.

Students do not communicate directly, but through their own initiative, their degree of comprehending the context and their involvement, thus the true problems of today's teaching are: appropriate or inappropriate learning content, learning and teaching strategies, working techniques, interests, initiative, motivation of the teacher to incorporate the new and appropriate words, structures or even techniques into the lecture.

Teachers may notice typical vocabulary mistakes that students make, but this is characteristic for the learning of a new language. It is also known how important the available vocabulary is for each person learning a language. Both vocabulary learning and communication in the foreign language are referred to in foreign language teaching as a major learning problem. The vocabulary and the vocabulary work can cause problems and difficulties in the teaching and learning process because there is an all-inclusive procedure that should be kept in mind. Because of the degree of usability of the words, difficulties arise in teaching the vocabulary.

Learning is an individual process, everyone has different interests and requirements to learn a foreign language, and everyone has a different learning style, is a different type of learner and has different experiences in learning a foreign language. All of these are reasons that can lead to difficulties in vocabulary acquisition and communication because not all students are confident enough in their ability to use the foreign language in communication and for this reason we should include different types of communication tasks in our teaching where the students have the chance to speak in pairs or in groups with their peers, thus making it easier for them to use the newly acquired words and phrases in different circumstances.

Vocabulary is an important part of the language skills students want to acquire, and teachers should always think of the most interesting ways in which they can develop the vocabulary as a skill in their students which can lead to the students using the foreign language independently in different contexts.

The knowledge students acquire in university should serve their entire life. They should always remember that they learn not just for a good grade in the exam, but for their future and the way we, as teachers, explain such things to them and teach them is essential.

In *How to teach Vocabulary*, Scott Thornbury highlights the fact that students need to learn both the meaning and the form of a new word and that both these characteristics of a new word should be taught "in close conjunction in order to ensure a tight meaning-and-form fit. The greater the gap between the presentation of a word's form and its meaning, the less likely that the learner will make a mental connection between the two."

Vocabulary work is a complex process that integrates all linguistic competences (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). Acquiring vocabulary actively and autonomously refers to the students' ability to independently acquire words, expressions and linguistic features of a foreign language.

We can say that we master the words only when we can use them correctly. Exercises depend on many factors: the purpose of the exercise, the subject, the students, the exercise material itself. We must always focus on the students in our

teaching process. The students develop language skills with the help of exercises and that is why we can say that they are means to an end.

The vocabulary exercises are very different and relate to the acquisition of the words, but also to their use and to the most important aim of learning a new language, which is communication. These exercises have the goal to contribute to the unfolding of a foreign language competence (understanding and sharing).

Acceptable translation from the target language to the students' native language definitely involves understanding, nonetheless the opposite is not automatically true: listening and reading abilities can be tested by several means, and not all include translation. But in what follows I will highlight two of the types of activities that I usually use in my translation seminars.

## **2. Assignments emphasizing translation**

### **2.1. Parallel texts**

For students it is essential to experience on their own the fact that translation tasks contain the same principles, matters and difficulties. In a translation lecture or seminar, this means that translation activities should comprise the study of two texts, one in the source language and the other in the target language, and each of them defines a different segment, but in these translation tasks there are thematic and vocabulary elements which are common to both texts.

The texts selected for this task should be short and taken from such sources which refer to technical language. In some circumstances, the source text will be in L1, in others in L2. At the first stage, which is a whole-group stage, teachers and students elicit and discuss significant characteristics of the text (background, register, technical features). Then the students work in pairs in order to discuss how specific words or phrases have been translated, to offer suggestions for the linguistic and further reasons for coming up with a certain choice, and also to inform their colleagues on other options that could have been suitable or accurate for that particular text. At this point, each pair or group of students has the chance to present one or more of the examples they have taken into account, mostly those which they have found challenging or those for which they still have not been able to find a suitable translation. The other students can interfere whenever they like. Students are consequently comforted by noticing that other students can also encounter difficulties in translation activities, but then encouraged to reflect on and discuss how they can find the best solution for their difficulty.

A corresponding exercise can be done with an original text (either L1 or L2) that has been selected for a translation exercise, and for which the teacher has provided a suggested version in the target language. For example, I gave my students a text in English and they had to translate it into Romanian in pairs, then we discussed the many translation options, thus highlighting the fact that not only one translation can be possible, but that there are many accepted options for the same text. The original text is the following one, selected from Pickett, *Technical English, Writing, Reading and Speaking*

*The Mars Science Laboratory, or MSL, is a rover, or mobile robot. It can move around on the surface of Mars. Look at the diagram of the rover. It has a body, six wheels, two robot arms, two antennas and a mast. The antennas and the mast are mounted on the*

*body, and the robot arms are attached to the front of the body. There are special tools at the end of each robot arm. Some tools break pieces of rock. Other tools dig and collect samples of soil. Scientific instruments in the rover then analyse the soil and rock powder. The top of the mast is about 2.1 metres above the ground. The mast supports two special cameras. They are called the MastCam and the ChemCam. The MastCam (mast camera) is at the top of the mast. It looks all around the rover. The ChemCam (chemistry camera) has a laser gun. The gun fires a laser beam at rocks up to 10 metres away and breaks them into powder. The camera then analyses the powder. The rover is about 2.2 m long and its total mass is just under 800 kg. This includes at least 60 kg of scientific instruments. It has a six-wheel drive and a special suspension system. The wheels are made of titanium and are 25 cm in diameter. The suspension system allows the six wheels to remain on the ground all the time. It also allows the rover to go over big rocks (up to 75 cm high), and over deep holes. Each wheel has its own motor. This allows the vehicle to rotate 360 degrees. It can move at a speed of up to 90 metres per hour. The average speed is about 30 metres per hour. The rover can operate in the temperature range on Mars. This ranges from -120 °C minimum up to 85°C maximum. The rover can travel up to 200 metres per day and can operate for up to one Mars year (approximately 687 days).*

And this is the translation carried out by one of the teams:

Laboratorul de științe Marte, sau MSL, este un automobil rover sau un robot mobil. Se poate deplasa pe suprafața planetei Marte. Uitați-vă la diagrama roverului. Are un corp, șase roți, două brațe de robot, două antene și un catarg. Antenele și catargul sunt montate pe corp, iar brațele robotului sunt atașate în partea din față a corpului. Există instrumente speciale la capătul fiecărui braț de robot. Unele unelte sparg bucăți de stâncă. Alte instrumente sapă și colectează probe de sol. Instrumentele științifice din rover analizează apoi pulberea de sol și de stâncă. Suprafața catargului este la aproximativ 2,1 metri deasupra pământului. Catargul susține două camere speciale. Ele sunt numite MastCam și ChemCam. MastCam (camera mast) este în partea de sus a catargului. Aceasta se rotește de jur împrejurul roverului. ChemCam (camera de chimie) are un pistol cu laser. Arma declanșează un fascicul laser înspre stânci aflate la o distanță de până la 10 metri și le transformă astfel în pulbere. Camera apoi analizează pulberea. Roverul are o lungime de aproximativ 2,2 metri, iar greutatea totală este sub 800 kg. Aceasta include cel puțin 60 kg de instrumente științifice. Are un sistem de tracțiune pe șase roți și un sistem special de suspensie. Roțile sunt fabricate din titan și au un diametru de 25 cm. Sistemul de suspensie permite celor șase roți să rămână pe teren tot timpul. De asemenea, permite roverului să treacă peste pietre mari (cu înălțimea de până la 75 cm) și peste gropi adânci. Fiecare roată are propriul său motor. Acest lucru permite vehiculului să se rotească la 360 de grade. Se poate deplasa cu o viteză de până la 90 de metri pe oră. Viteza medie este de aproximativ 30 de metri pe oră. Roverul poate funcționa în intervalul de temperatură de pe Marte. Aceasta variază de la -120°C minimum până la 85°C maxim. Roverul poate călători până la 200 de metri pe zi și poate funcționa până la un an Marte (aproximativ 687 de zile).

## 2.2. Summary translation (L2 to L1 or vice-versa)

From our students' perspective, the benefit of summary translation as a task is that a target language correspondent does not automatically have to be established for every source language word or expression. On the other hand, students are asked to be conscious of the overall characteristics and significant topics of the text, and to

establish how to reveal these issues in the target language text. Making use of appropriate texts, and working with students who are used to performing translation activities, writing a summary or gist translation in the first language of an original text in the second language can be given as an exercise to be carried out in a limited period of time, possible to be performed in pairs or in groups. Exactly the way it is done in all foreign language assignments, the teacher tells the students which are the objectives of the task, accompanied by the requirement to form a fast summary of the text, and to make deliberate decisions about what to take into account, reduce or eliminate, and the main significance of the communication of content.

The original text is selected from *Professional English in Use, Engineering, Technical English for Professionals*.

*Calculating the capacity of an electricity grid -the amount of energy it needs to supply to users -might seem simple. Just add up the power supplied over a given period of time to give the total amount consumed by users. Then, divide the cumulative amount of power used during the whole period by the number of hours in the period. The result is an average level of consumption per hour. But there's one problem with this method - and it's a major one. The rate of power consumption -the amount that's being consumed at a particular moment- is not constant. In other words, consumption does not stay at the same level all the time. So electricity supply requirements cannot simply be averaged out over time. People use more power at certain times of day, and less at other times, which means that demand for power fluctuates significantly. Generally, it rises to a maximum in the evening (peak demand is at evening mealtimes), and falls to its lowest levels during the night. These fluctuations are so big that at peak times consumption can be twice as high as it is during off-peak times. Clearly, the grid needs to have sufficient capacity to meet demand when consumption peaks. But since each peak is brief, the grid will only run to capacity - at or close to its maximum capability- for a few moments each day. This means, most of the time, it has significant spare capacity.*

One of the summaries provided by my students is the following one:

*Textul se referă la calculul capacității unei rețele de electricitate – cantitatea de energie necesară furnizării către utilizatori – ceea ce poate părea simplu. Ni se spune să adăugăm energia furnizată într-o anumită perioadă de timp pentru a afla suma totală consumată de utilizatori. Apoi, să împărțim cantitatea cumulată de energie utilizată pe întreaga perioadă cu numărul de ore din perioada respectivă. Rezultatul este un nivel mediu de consum pe oră. Dar există o problemă importantă cu această metodă Rata consumului de energie nu este constantă. Cu alte cuvinte, consumul nu rămâne tot timpul la același nivel pentru că oamenii folosesc mai multă electricitate în anumite momente ale zilei și mai puțin în alte momente, ceea ce înseamnă că cererea de energie fluctuează în mod semnificativ. În general, se ridică la o capacitate maximă seara și scade la cel mai jos nivel în timpul nopții. Aceste fluctuații sunt atât de mari încât, în perioada de vârf, consumul poate fi de două ori mai mare decât în alte perioade. În mod evident, rețeaua trebuie să aibă o capacitate suficientă pentru a satisface cererea atunci când atinge consumul maxim. Dar, deoarece fiecare consum de vârf este scurt, rețeaua va funcționa la sau aproape de capacitatea sa maximă pentru scurt timp în fiecare zi. Aceasta înseamnă că rețeaua de electricitate are o capacitate de rezervă semnificativă.*

Solving different translation assignments is not an easy task, on the contrary, it is rather challenging and it takes time, especially when the text to be translated

requires a thorough understanding of the topic and of the vocabulary. For this reason, certain words and phrases that are involved in the translation task need to be discussed and explained in advance if we want to motivate our students for such activities.

### 3. Conclusion

Learning new words and how to communicate independently are two of the most important tasks when learning a new language. Vocabulary is very important because it allows you to communicate and understand, even if you have not yet learned the sentence construction in question. Vocabulary learning is one of the most crucial and interesting areas of foreign language teaching. Vocabulary work should be result-oriented and student-centered, specifically, a lesson goal directed at receptive and productive mastery of a particular set of words.

The teachers should always be positive and trustful, they should help the students, motivate them, create a friendly environment during the lecture, if necessary, work with them at different levels. The topics and exercises used in a seminar should be very interesting and attractive, so that learning should also be entertaining. The methodical techniques are intended to make the students develop the varied assignments with interest and to continue to use them independently in new contexts during the lecture but also individually in different communicative situations outside university.

The methods teachers use during a lecture are designed to build trust in students. If the teacher succeeds, then the students will also be involved and understand that learning is also their own responsibility, not just the teacher's. Furthermore, teachers should consider adapting the teaching methods to the characteristics of the students, the techniques of differentiation as permanent working techniques and the activation of the students in the process of vocabulary acquisition and communication as a subsequent learning objective.

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