RETOS EN LA ADQUISICIÓN DE LAS LITERATURAS Y DE LAS LENGUAS EN LA ERA DIGITAL

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de la Lengua y la Literatura

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*Retos en la Adquisición de las Literaturas
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The translation of poetry as a didactic tool for multilingual teaching in Catalan as a Foreign Language: a proposal[1]

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Introduction

Since the rejection of grammar-translation methodology and the emergence of direct methods, translation has not been well regarded in the teaching of foreign languages (Hanauer, 2001:295). However, in the past decade, several authors acknowledge that translation can facilitate the learning of vocabulary, grammar and syntax, and strengthen written communication, through an activity of comparison of structures and ways of expressing ideas (Witte *et al.*, 2009; Leonardi, 2010, Cook, 2010).

The idea that languages enrich each other and that there is a constant process of transfer of linguistic knowledge is not recent. Already in the 1980's Cummins (1981) developed the concept of *Common Underlying Proficiency*, which explained that the L1 was a positive tool for the acquisition of the L2, since the cognitive, linguistic and metalinguistic foundations, once they are acquired in the L1, constitute a base for the learning of additional languages. In this climate of acceptance of the L1, it seems logical to revive translation as a classroom activity, as it is thought to facilitate the comparison between language structures, syntax and lexis, and it helps make students aware of the differences and similarities.

Furthermore, translation can be considered as a communicative activity, the "fifth skill" in language learning, as it is, in fact, a natural cognitive activity. Cook (2010) claims that it is a useful skill personally, socially and professionally because it is carried out constantly in real life; it provides educational insight into the nature of language and culture, and, "it helps in the safeguarding of student's L1 identities, ensuring that the learning of a new language is an addition and not a suppression of their L1" (Cook, ibid). It is expressed in this way in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages:

> Translation or interpretation, a paraphrase, summary or record, provides for a third party a (re) formulation of a source text to which this third party does not have direct access. Mediating language activities −(re)processing an existing text− occupy an important place in the normal linguistic functioning of our societies. (Council of Europe, 2001:14)

Apart from recognising the potential benefits of translation tasks in foreign language teaching, as already mentioned above, the use of literary translation in university classrooms −poetry in this particular

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case– could also be interesting, since it is a context in which the study of a language is closely related to Literary and Cultural Studies. With this in mind, combining language learning with the discovery of poetry and its authors seems suitable for students at university, so in addition to being a tool for language learning, poetry contributes to the literary education of students, since it is also important to understand the past and present of the culture they are studying, and it is fundamental for comprehensive training.

Some arguments in favour of using poetry in this context would be the following:

- A poem, due to its short length and its autonomous and full meaning, is an optimal textual genre to work in the foreign language classroom.

- Prototypically, poetry has a fixed external shape, where rhyme and rhythm are very important features. For this reason, poetry could be a good tool to allow L2 students to grasp the pronunciation and prosody of the new language.

- The importance of introducing poetry in the L2 classroom resides in the fact that it is a literary genre to which students are not normally exposed. This is because there is a tendency to think that poetry is always cryptic, quite old-fashioned and very difficult to understand. Although this can sometimes be the case, poetry is not always obscure and abstract, and the complexity of poetical texts does not reside in the genre itself, but in the poet's style. A good example could be the poetry of Pablo Neruda, in Spanish, or Vicent Andrés Estellés, in Catalan: full of expressivity, but linguistically accessible for foreign language students.

Based on the above, we designed a translation activity for the Catalan language classroom from the multilingual version of a poem by Vicent Andrés Estellés.[2]

Using translation for a plurilingual competence: teaching proposal

The aims of this teaching proposal are:

- To bring cultural and literary works closer to students, to have a more comprehensive approach to the language they study. To generate an interest towards the literary production of the Catalan language. In the case of Vicent Andrés Estellés, a poet translated into multiple languages, students can observe the repercussion and international notoriety of Catalan literature.

- To make the poetic text a familiar material to the students.

- To develop multilingual and interlingual skills: the proposal aims to increase students' awareness about the importance of transversal and cognitive strategies in language learning. This means to use the lexical and grammatical knowledge in the L2 to serve as a stepping stone for the acquisition of the L3.

- To enhance students' translational skills. Translation can help to develop awareness of language aspects such as semantic accuracies and inaccuracies, linguistic variation (colloquialisms and dialectalisms). This activity allows students to reflect upon the fact that *perfect* translation does not exist by observing the difficulty of expressing the exact same meaning in different languages.

The proposal has been developed in a 60 minutes lesson and it has been carried out in three different groups of 14 students each. Students are given several translations (in English, Italian, Spanish and French) of a poem, and they work in pairs in the back-translation into Catalan.

The lesson plan is as follows:

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[2] This poem is available in the following link: http://www.visat.cat/traduccions-literatura-catalana/cat/fragments/128/17/0/3/0/vicent-andres-estelles.html [11-11-2014].

1. Each student reads individually the poem in the English version translated by Dominic Keown (2013:39). Then, as an activity involving the whole class, students think and comment about the topic of the poem.

2. Students form pairs in which they share at least one L2, (either Spanish, French or Italian). They read a second handout with different translated versions in Spanish, Italian and French.[3] Using these versions, students will think about the possible translation problems or difficulties (for example, different semantic connotations among the translated versions).

3. The English poem is divided into seven parts. Each pair has to translate one part of the poem. Students write the translation of their part online, in a Google Docs' document.[4] This allows them to see the translation options taken by their peers. It could be a good reference, for instance, when one word or structure appears repeatedly in the text (such as the cases of *pimentó* and *oli cru*), to see how another couple dealt with the translation of those terms.

4. In turns, each pair reads aloud the part that they have translated. There is a group discussion about the problems or difficulties that students have found when translating (e.g. difficulty finding the right equivalent, or maintaining, or not, the rhythm of a free-verse poem).

5. Finally, students are provided with the last handout, which contains the original poem by Vicent Andrés Estellés, and they read it individually while they are encouraged to reflect upon the following questions: Why are their versions of the poem (so) different from the original? Where specifically can these differences be found?

At the end of the lesson, students were asked to answer a questionnaire to assess the task.

Results

After reading the English translation of the poem, one student commented on the register, pointing out that if the translation uses words from Germanic etymology is to keep a colloquial tone. From this observation, she deducts that the original poem should also be colloquial.

In the back-translated versions we find several interesting language aspects about verb endings, vocabulary choices and syntax that will be commented in the next lines.

1. *Res **no** m'agrada tant*

We observe that the double negation from the original, *res no m'agrada tant*, is lost in all the back-translations. The double negation was only found in French: *rien au monde ne me plaît autant*. This can be because students associate the structure to Spanish, in which double negations are not grammatically correct: *nada me gusta tanto.* Also in Catalan this double negation is not compulsory.

2. *com **enramar-me** d'oli **cru***

In this verse we find two lexical differences. In the first place, the verb *enramar* is back- translated by *amarar*, *adornar* and *arruixar*. We have noticed that in the first case *amarar* is translated from the Spanish *empapar*, and in the case of *arruixar*, students get this word from the translation of the French *arroser*. The choices in the back-translations do not match the semantic meaning of the original, but this is because none of the multilingual translations managed to do it.

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[3] In the following link, you can look up the second worksheet with the English, Spanish, Italian and French translations of the poem, given to students in the second step to rebuild the original poem in Catalan based on these texts: http://ainamonferrer.com/?p=584 [23-12-2014].

[4] In the same link, you can also look up the resulting back translations of the different groups, in comparison with the original poem, written in Catalan: http://ainamonferrer.com/?p=584 [23-12-2014].

In this same verse, we also find one difference in the translation of *cru*. Despite the fact that all the Romance versions used *cru* (see *crudo*, sp; *crudo*, it; *crue*, fr), one of the groups used *verge*, using as a model the English version (*virgin*), probably because of the connotations of *crude* (*oil*) in English.

3. el **pimentó** torrat, tallat en tires

The three back-translations used two different words to refer to *pepper* (*pebrot* and *pebre*). None of them coincides with the original *pimentó*. This is due to the fact that in the very quotidian semantic field of vegetables, there is an important geographical variation, and *pimentó* belongs to a specific dialect. These dialectological marks are lost in all the multilingual translations, so it is impossible for the students to reflect them on their back-translations.

4. **raone** amb l'oli cru

The verb raone is conjugated following the standard of occidental Catalan, again, this is a dialectological mark that is lost in the translations. When the students back-translated this verb, they all conjugated following the standard oriental Catalan (*converso* and *parlo*).

Two of the groups chose the verb *parlar (to speak)*, a verb with a wider meaning than the original *raonar*.

The other group chose *conversar* (*to discuss*), which is closer to the original *raonar*, although there is still a semantic difference.

5. **mes** no massa torrat, que el desgracia

The three groups translated the connective word *mes* by *però*, which is the most common adversative conjunction. With this choice, students lose the archaic tone found in the original and that it is also in the Spanish version with the use of *mas*. The multilingual translations do not reflect this nuance.

6. l'expose dins el plat en **tongades** incitants

Tongades incitants is probably the most abstract concept in the original poem. This produces different interpretations in the translations, which opt for quite diverse semantic options: *cullerades incitants*, *tires temptadores* and *tires incitantes*.

In the French version there is a semantic mismatch with the word *cuillerées* that is transferred to one of the back-translations as *cullerades*.

In the other two back-translations, the concept *tongada* is lost. Students translate from the English *strip*, instead of using the Spanish version as a reference, which contained the word *tongada*.

7. amb un **pessic** de sal

Two of the semantic mistakes found in the back-translations are due to a lack of linguistic knowledge. The dictionaries often show several entries, but the lack of context can mislead the choice. This is the case of *una polsada de sel* and *un polsim de sal*. If students had checked the meaning of these two words in a monolingual dictionary, they would have realised that they do not work in this context.

Furthermore, these lexical mistakes were not expected, since in any of the multilingual versions (*un pizzico di sale*, *une pincée de sel*, *a pinch of salt*) the literal translation of these expressions would have led to the original *un pessic de sal*.

8. **cloc** els ulls i **me'l fot**

There are two words that need to be commented in this verse. *Cloc* (*to close*) is translated by *tanque* (*to close*) which is the most standard word for this action. The verb *cloure* belongs to a higher register,

causing an intentioned contrast with the end of the verse which is highly colloquial. This contrast was already lost in all the multilingual translations and that is why students opted by the most common option of the verb. Furthermore, the use of the verb *tancar* conjugated in the oriental variety (*tanco*) makes the back-translations more distant from original dialect.

The verb *fotre*, found in the expression *me'l fot*, has a very wide meaning, and it often works as an euphemism, or in this specific case it has a double meaning. Although these connotations were also found in the multilingual versions (see *me lo trinco*, *me lo divoro*, *me l'enfile*), the back-translations neutralise the double meaning, and translate only the one referring to *eating*.

One of the groups chose the most neutral expression, which is *me'l menjo* (*I eat it*). But the other two groups opted for the less common option *me'l cruspeixo*. Although the verb *cruspir-se* is the third entry after *endrapar* and *devorar* for the English word *gobble*, we think that students saw in this pronominal verb a most appropriate translation as it had a syntactical coincidence with all the options in the Romance languages.

Conclusion

After the task, students were asked to answer an evaluation questionnaire. Despite the shortness of the proposal, the experience has been rewarding. All students but one have positively evaluated the task. Students found especially interesting the fact of working with different languages and registers.

This translation task obliges students to follow a deductive reasoning to reconstruct the original poem based on the different versions. From these versions, they have to think about the choices made by the translators to deduce how the original version was written.

The students have quickly connected with the poem's sense and meaning and it has been possible to rise interlinguistic awareness. In other words, it has been underlined the idea that linguistic transfer is not always negative.

Multilingual translation activities, such as the one proposed, are useful for training the students' plurilingual and interlinguistic transfer skills, in order to encourage those positive interlinguistic relationships. Transfer occurs, in any case, unconsciously in the students' mind, but it is a matter of training students to make them aware of this cognitive process to optimize the language acquisition..

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