



THINKING IN ENGLISH OR TRANSLATING FAST?

I've heard many students say "I want to think in English", and many teachers say "Don't translate, you have to think in English" – haven't you?

In my first years of teaching I remember saying things like that to my students, until some years later a colleague told me: "That doesn't exist. You don't think in a foreign language when you acquire it at an older age, you just develop a super fast ability to translate it, and that happens so seamlessly that you have a false idea that you're thinking in the foreign language."

Although I thought my colleague's theory was, let's say... rather unsubstantiated, I've often pondered on the idea, especially when I hear someone say 'think in English' to a beginner learner. Hence, I'm writing this article to share some things I've found, some comments I've heard, and some practical things we can do about the question of whether to allow translation in our classes.

In May, 2011, I posted the following quote^[1] on a Facebook group for teachers:

"... late acquisition of languages beyond the first are laid down on the psychological foundation organized through the meanings internalized in one's first language; that is, we may speak more than one language but we have only one inner speech. What this means then is that our thinking processes are fundamentally carried out through the support (i.e. mediation) provided by our first language" (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006: 110)

And I also mentioned that whereas I am very comfortable with reasoning in English, even when not verbalizing it, to the point that when I have to explain in Portuguese about my work I can be pretty bad at it, when I'm doing simple math, or even counting from 13 to 23 in some sort of inner speech, I feel I function better in my L1. This is quite puzzling.



There were some very interesting comments in this thread, and I'll share a few with you, they may resonate with your experience:

"The language we speak is not necessarily the one that best conveys our thoughts - but that there could be a language (that you don't necessarily speak) that is more adequate for expressing your precise thoughts... It begs the question - is our inner speech actually in our first language? - Phil Bird, ESOL teacher, UK.

"My experience (...) as a bilingual speaker of Brazilian Portuguese and as a professional conference interpreter (...) is that when I'm doing a head-count, for example, or counting repetitions in a cycle of exercise, that counting takes place internally in English (my L1)... I've often found this strange considering that so many other parts of my life are conducted totally in Portuguese. So I would agree that our L1 tends to remain dominant for inner speech." - Graeme Hodgson, Educational Manager, Brazil.

"I 'used to be' bilingual (meaning I have stopped speaking what would be my L2), but there are still things I can only express using it - mostly things about the country (South Africa) and some of the experiences I had there - possibly because the verbalisation of those experiences was in my L2, so they don't have any other existence?" - Candy Van Olst, teacher and manager, UK.

"My experience (and my dreams) tells me that it isn't true. We can continue to accommodate concepts... in fact, whilst some concepts are socio-culturally acquired (eg 'kettle' or 'crumpet') others are not, but are more dependent on life experience and we may not even have a word in any language in our inner voice/ear. We can feel far more than we can label. Also, as we add new lexis, we are simply labelling concepts in a new way." - Fiona Mauchline, teacher and writer, Spain.

Again, early in 2012 at a conference in Barcelona, I became even more interested in all this when I saw Phillip Kerr's talk on 'the return of translation'. Phillip wrote a blog-handout^[2] for this talk (see below in references), so I will not comment too much on what he said. Instead I'll use three of his key arguments in the talk to make some connections with my own experience.

1. Oppression and identity

My first five years as an English learner were carried out almost exclusively in classrooms. On the door of every classroom there was this sign: 'Only English is spoken beyond this door', which was strictly followed by teachers. A question that Phillip raised about this approach to language teaching relates to how oppressive it can be when we consider that whereas humanistic approaches are given a lot of credit because of their learner-centeredness and care for learner's identity; an English-only policy smothers one of the most fundamental elements of identity, namely one's mother tongue. I don't think I was being oppressed in this respect, at least I was not aware of it, and now I can't see whether I would be better off if I could have spoken my L1 (Portuguese)

beyond those doors. However, some of my colleagues must have been, I reckon.

2. Translation will happen anyway

For us who have taught monolingual groups, we know how infuriating it is when we spend 5 minutes eliciting, giving examples, drawing, mimicking, and all that to try and convey the meaning of a word without translating, and a student says 'ahhh... *bagunça, né?*', for example. Wouldn't it be more efficient if we translated the word in half a second and dedicated more time for students to practice the new word in English?

I personally don't think we should be translating every word, of course not, we are teachers, not walking dictionaries. But isn't there somehow an overrated value of language presentation techniques (e.g. situational presentation, guided discovery, flashcards, etc), when it seems students learn more by using the language in a meaningful and purposeful way themselves regardless of how they were taught it? So, according to the argument, if translation will happen anyway, why not translate it and then get down to what matters the most? That is, practice.

3. The origins of 'translating is bad'.

Translation was banned because native-speakers couldn't be bothered to learn the language of their students, and not exactly because research in the field said it was better not to translate. What I know from my own practice is that I'm a much more efficient teacher when I speak or have a clue about my students' languages, even in cases where I don't speak their language at all but can relate to many aspects of their culture, e.g. when I teach Italians. In one way or another, there is more evidence for translation in the language classroom than against it. A couple of conclusions drawn in academia:

"Franklin (1990) found that over 80% of teachers used the first language for explaining grammar... SLA research provides no reason why any of these activities is not a perfectly rational use of L1 in the classroom. If 21st century teaching is to continue to accept the ban on the first language imposed by the late 19th century, it will have to look elsewhere for its rationale. As Swain & Lapkin (2000) put it: 'To insist that no use be made of the L1 in carrying out tasks that are both linguistically and cognitively complex is to deny the use of an important cognitive tool.'" (Cook, 2008: 182)^[3]

"It is foolish to arbitrarily exclude this proven and efficient means of communicating meaning. To do so would be directly parallel to saying that pictures or real objects should not be used in the L2 class (Nation 1978). All the arguments against L1 use similarly apply to the use of pictures, real objects, and demonstration. The L1 needs to be seen as a useful tool that like other tools should be used where needed but should not be over-used." (Nation, 2003: 5)^[4]



But haven't we many times blamed translation and the use of Portuguese as one of the causes of our country's low achievement in English proficiency? Research and opinions aside, the challenge is actually how to make it work in practice, how to make translation an informed choice the teacher makes which will in turn lead to better student learning; and not, as it happens, to use translation just because it's too burdensome to teach in any other way.

The argument for translation also includes a strong concern to find pedagogical activities which raise teachers and students' awareness of the implications of translation. For example, instead of discouraging the use of Google Translate, because it's sometimes inaccurate, what are ways in which we can bring it to the classroom and make it work in our favor?

Here are three very simple ideas you can use to incorporate translation with positive learning outcomes.

1. Retranslation – translating from L1 to English and then back to L1.

This can be done along with many different activities. Generally, it's better if it is done with a short text, preferably a student-generated text. E.g. Each student writes a sentence (not a very simple one) or short paragraph in English. They pass it on to the person on their right, who will translate it to English. After that, they pass the translated version (without the original) on to the person on their right again, who will translate it back to L1. Students compare original sentence with the retranslated one. Of course, this can be done starting from English, then L1, then back to English, as you prefer.

2. Translating a song back to English.

Get the lyrics of a popular song that you think your students will know. The lyrics should be in English, but you will translate it into your students' first language (or maybe you can find the

translation on the web). Remove or change obvious clues of who wrote the song. Ask students to translate the L1 version into English. See if they can guess what song it is. Students then compare their versions and the teacher can check for any inaccuracies. Show students the original version (English) and have them compare. Work on their interpretation more than whether their translation corresponds to the original. Play the song and have fun!

3. Teach the teacher.

For teachers who don't share students' L1. A nice idea is to ask students to help you understand something in their language/culture. E.g. students explain in English the meaning of common local idiomatic expressions and when it's appropriate to use them. Students translate slogans and taglines of famous national brands. Students produce an English version of a folk story; etc.


In sum, we will probably differ in our answers to the question in the title. Whether foreign/second language speakers can think in English or not, the important thing to bear in mind is that at the same time we shouldn't encourage the old pedagogy of grammar-translation, we should nonetheless incorporate translation in our methodology by informed practice and of course by discussing and observing how our students respond and learn from it. As research and our own experience suggest, there is nothing bad about translation in language learning, just 'handle with care'.

References:

¹ Lantolf, J. P., & Thorne, S. L. (2006). Sociocultural theory and the genesis of second language development. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

² Translation Handout by Philip Kerr <http://translationhandout.wordpress.com/>

³ Cook, V. (2008). Second language learning and teaching. 4th edition. Hodder Arnold.

⁴ Nation, P. (2003). The role of the first language in foreign language learning. *Asian EFL Journal*, 5(2). 



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