INTRODUCTION

This volume marks seven years of collaboration between Minnesota and Wisconsin on the MinneTESOL/WITESOL Journal, and over nineteen years since the beginning of the MinneTESOL Journal. We are pleased to continue this affiliate collaboration. The articles in this volume collectively examine the multiple roles ESL teachers play in the classroom, in schools, and in workplaces.

Our first article, by Andrew Cohen, addresses the types of translation our students may use to help their acquisition of English in written and oral situations. Here the teacher is seen as needing to be sensitive to various learning styles and not assume that old ideas of “English only” in the classroom are most effective.

Mental and Written Translation Strategies in ESL

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This paper starts by drawing two distinctions with regard to translation as performed by ESL learners—literal vs. free translation and mental vs. written translation. Then ESL learner style preferences are related to the choice of translation strategies. Third, examples of strategic use of translation are illustrated. Next, the issue of why teachers might admonish learners not to use translation is discussed, and finally empirical studies providing evidence as to the potentially positive effect of strategic translation in reading, writing, listening, and speaking are presented.

THE ROLE OF TRANSLATION IN LEARNING ESL

There are two useful distinctions in defining “translation”: ...the process of changing speech or writing from one language (the source language) into another (the target language)... A translation which reproduces the general meaning and intention of the original but which does not closely follow the grammar, style, or organization of it is known as a free translation. A translation which approximates to a word-for-word representation of the original is known as a literal translation. (Richards, Platt, & Platt, 1992)

The focus in this paper is on the kind of amateur translation conducted by untrained ESL learners on a daily basis, sometimes reflecting free translation and at times very literal. We will not be referring to the kind of translation performed by a trained interpreter or skilled translator of written texts.

Another distinction that we will make aside from literal vs. free translation is that between mental and written translation. While written translation involves the actual writing down of the translation, whether it be words, phrases, sentences, or entire texts, mental translation is limited to the mental reprocessing of source material in the target language. Written translation is presumably the product of efforts by the learner to select from among the various mental translations that the learner has performed prior to writing something down. Invariably,
there is a back and forth between mental and written translation in that learners are likely to craft more than one mental translation of source language material before one version is selected to be written down, if the learner produces a written version. Then, of course, this version may be revised, depending on the learner and on the purpose for the translation.

There are times when the use of translation may be of strategic value to ESL learners in both learning English and in using the English they have learned. Having said this, let us remember that there may be differences in choice of translation strategies and in the way these strategies are used, depending on the individual’s learning style preferences (see Reid, 1995, Ehrman, 1996). Table 1 provides a sampling of style preferences and possible ways in which these preferences might influence the use of translation strategies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Style Preference</th>
<th>Statement of Style Preference in Extreme Form</th>
<th>Possible Relationship to Translation Strategies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Closure-oriented learners</td>
<td>They plan and carry out studies carefully, do lessons on time or early, and prefer clear deadlines. They may be organized and dislike ambiguity, uncertainty, and fussiness.</td>
<td>They may favor translation as one possible means to resolve uncertainties and ambiguities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Visual learners</td>
<td>They prefer to learn through the sense of sight, i.e., through books, computers, video, charts, graphs, and pictures.</td>
<td>They may be likely to use written translation so that they cannot see the source and target language versions in front of their eyes.</td>
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<td>Auditory learners</td>
<td>They like to participate in frequent listening and speaking activities, such as discussions, debates, audiotape or broadcast-listening, oral reading, role-plays, and lectures.</td>
<td>If they translate, they may prefer to stick to mental translation rather than to write it down.</td>
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<td>Global learners</td>
<td>They attend to the gestalt—the big picture, and the main idea, and they are oriented toward processing from the top down. They go from context.</td>
<td>They may wish to translate just for the big picture and just get the gist of what is said or written.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Particular learners</td>
<td>They focus on discrete items and details and remembering specific information about a topic, with processing that moves from the bottom up.</td>
<td>They may translate in order to better understand specific details, and the use of written translation may work best for them in those situations.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Analytic learners</td>
<td>They tend to both notice the particular details and also to put ideas apart, to perform logical analysis and contrast tasks, and to focus on grammatical details and grammar rules.</td>
<td>They may wish to use more literal translation in order to compare the source and target language material more precisely.</td>
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There are two other factors that may influence whether translation strategies are used and how they are used. The first is the learners’ language proficiencies. A study by Hawras (1996) with 27 University of Minnesota students from eight different sections of Spanish language classes, representing three different proficiency levels, found differences across proficiency levels. The beginning and intermediate students reported translating portions of the text mentally into English about as often as they got the meaning directly from Spanish. The advanced group used mental translation into English only about one quarter of the time. This finding that advanced students translated the least would be expected, in that the more proficient one becomes in a foreign language, the less there is a need to rely on the first language (L1).

It also appeared that the more advanced a learner was in the foreign language, the more likely it was that the act of translating actually facilitated comprehension. However, for the beginning group, comprehension was achieved in only about half of all the instances of reported mental translation. For this group mental translation into English either did not help them understand some linguistic unit or caused them to misunderstand it as often as it facilitated comprehension. The intermediate and advanced groups were found to be similar with respect to what they comprehended. When they did avail themselves of mental translation, these two groups had a similar success rate in terms of the proportion of accurate comprehension of all reported instances of mental translation: 62% for the intermediate group to 68% for the advanced group. This finding might suggest that as learners are more proficient in a foreign language, they acquire a sense of when mental translation into English is likely to yield better results.

The other factor that may influence whether translation strategies are used and how they are used is that of discourse context. If for example, language learners are listening to a talk in the second language (L2) or reading an L2 text in a discourse context that is familiar to them, they may find they are less likely to translate back into their L1. It may be, in fact, that the learners have studied the material for that discourse context exclusively in the L2. If the discourse context is unfamiliar to them, learners may be expected to translate more from L1 to L2 and the reverse. And certainly one might expect learners to translate less when they are in an L2 context where they are surrounded by the language than in a foreign-language context, where contact with the language is more limited.

We will first consider several of the situations in which learners may use translation strategically. Next, we will briefly consider teachers’ admonitions to learners regarding the use of translation. Finally, we will look at findings from studies which included investigation of
mental and written translation strategies in language learning and language use in one or more skill areas.

Examples of Learners’ Strategic Use of Translation

If the languages are very similar to one another in structure and lexicon, translation may help to highlight the one or more areas of difference between them. Some language users may rely especially on mental translation as a monitoring strategy to make sure that faux amis (“false friends”) are avoided. For example, an ESL student whose native language is Portuguese may be prone to use the Portuguese word for “recess” (at school), which is intervalo, since “interval” does exist in English. The strategic use of mental translation might warn the speaker that “interval” in English means “space or period of time” and does not mean “recess.”

At the other end of the spectrum, learners may wish to translate certain key structures expressly because the languages are dramatically different with regard to a structure or lexical item. In such cases, translating may help them to accentuate the differences and fix these differences comfortably in their mind. So, for example, there may be cases where a verb in a foreign language has two ostensibly different meanings and the language user needs to translate them out to make sure that s/he does not mistakenly use the wrong one. So, an ESL student who is a native speaker of Hebrew uses the same verb, levaker, for both “to visit” and “to criticize.” It should be clear to the reader how dangerous it might be to use the wrong translation equivalent in an English conversation with, say, a native English-speaking mother-in-law!

One of the potential uses of translation as a strategic tool in language learning and language use could be to monitor for literal translation in spoken or written language, especially among learners with, say, concrete-sequential and analytic style preferences. While literal translation may work in some instances, in other instances it could produce stilleft and even erroneous language (e.g., “He won’t give me to speak with her” – the literal translation of the Hebrew hu lo noten li lidaber ita (“he won’t let me speak with her”). For this reason, it is incumbent upon the learner in his or her role as strategic translator to also monitor the spoken and written output so as to avoid erroneous literal translation.

Teachers’ Admonitions to Learners Regarding the Use of Translation

The following quote is from an advanced learner of Spanish at the university level (Hawras, 1996, p. 55): “Actually (thinking in Spanish) is something that I’ve been working on, um ...cause my Spanish teacher in high school said ‘You’re not gonna get anywhere if you keep translating in your head.’” The student is simply echoing the oft-heard taboo against translation. In situations where the objective is to become fluent in a foreign language, both in the receptive and productive skills, learners such as the one cited above have often been encouraged to avoid translation from the native or dominant language as much as possible during the language learning and language use process. This admonition is supported by the assumption that it is beneficial for L2 learners to function in the language that they are learning rather than to keep translating back and forth between the target language and their L1.

This assumption had been at the core of what are now somewhat dated foreign language learning methods that have systematically avoided the use of the learner’s L1, at least during the initial phase of instruction — methods such as the Silent Way, Total Physical Response, and the Natural Approach. With regard to the Silent Way, Cattegno expressed his position as follows:

Throughout our oral work with the rods and the visual dictation on the charts, we have carefully avoided the use of the students native languages. We have even succeeded in blocking them so that the students relate to the new language directly (1976, p. 99).

Krashen and Terrell stipulated the following with regard to the Natural Approach: “(a) The instructor always uses the target language, (b) the focus of the communication will be on a topic of interest for the student, and (c) the instructor will strive at all times to help the student understand.” (1983, p. 20) Asher described his Total Physical Response method as follows: “Understanding should be developed through movements of the student’s body.” (1977, p. 4) “When you cast material in the imperative, there is no translation.” (p. 20) In classrooms using Total Physical Response, learners have not only been encouraged to refrain from speaking in their L1, but they have also not had to speak in the L2 during the early stages as well. The focus has just been on aural comprehension.

In using methods such as these, teachers have implicitly or explicitly discouraged students from translating, and the learners themselves have probably come to feel that L1 or other-language thinking could be detrimental to the learning process. The argument has been that by functioning as much as possible in the L2 right from the start, learners will increase their chances of becoming idiomatically accurate in that language. This maxim has usually been applied to the more external, visible forms of language—namely, speaking and writing. For example, native speakers of English will usually notice errors among nonnative speakers which they would probably ascribe to the influence
of the native language. For example, a native Hebrew-speaking ESL student may say, "‘The policeman didn’t give me to enter here,” instead of “The policeman didn’t let me enter here,” a direct translation from the L1. Teachers might suggest that such errors would disappear if the speakers were to think more in English while they are speaking.

Perhaps more so than with the spoken language, the written output of ESL learners has been analyzed for those errors which appear to be a result of negative transfer from the native language. Again, the assumption would be that functioning through English while writing would help to decrease the number of such errors. Teachers are probably less likely to admonish learners to think only in English when they listen to it or when they read it because these are the more invisible forms of language processing.

While it is probably beneficial for ESL learners to attempt to function as much as possible in English, some of them may need to perform one or another kind of translation at times or even extensively. It would depend in part on their learning style preferences. It might also depend on whether English is being learned in an environment where both languages are being used interchangeably (sometimes referred to as a coordinate bilingualism situation) or in an environment that is removed from contact with the native language (referred to as a compound bilingualism situation).²

Thus, regardless of teacher admonitions, it is likely that translation goes on continually as ESL learners perform different tasks in English, perhaps less so as the learner becomes an advanced user of English and less so in an ESL rather than an EFL context. However, the use of translation need not be seen just as an unfortunate crutch. Perhaps in part because learners differ in their learning style preferences, as illustrated above, as well as in their preferences as to the strategies they select for language learning and for language use, there is empirical evidence that selective translation between the source and the target languages has been found to play a positive role for some, if not many, language learners in the performing of language tasks.

Research on Translation Across the Language Skills

Research on the use of mental translation in the four skill areas will be reviewed in this section. First, research on the role of translation in reading will be presented, then research on the use of mental and written translation for developing and organizing text, and finally several studies including the use of translation in listening and speaking.

Translating While Reading

A study conducted with intermediate learners of French at UC

Berkeley (Kern, 1994) and a replication with beginning, intermediate, and advanced learners of Spanish at the University of Minnesota (Hawras, 1996; Cohen, 1998) helped identify at least five strategic purposes that nonnative readers reported having for using mental translation while reading:

1. A strategy for remembering points in the text
   a. For chunking material into semantic clusters:
      While learners are reading a text in the target language, it may be less of a burden on memory if they chunk lexical items into semantic clusters in the native language.
   b. For keeping the train of thought: The use of mental translation helps to keep the train of thought when chunks are long or syntactically complex. Mental translation allows learners to represent portions of the text in a familiar, memory-efficient form long enough for meaning to be integrated and assimilated.

2. A strategy for creating a network of associations: Since the network of associations is richer in the L1 or dominant language, the reader gives extra life to concepts by bringing them into that language.

3. A strategy for enhancing the familiarity of the text: Converting the input into a more familiar, user-friendly L1 version is likely to have a positive motivational effect. By engaging in mental translation, the readers are bolstering the confidence they have in their ability to comprehend the text.

4. A strategy for clarifying grammatical roles: Mental translation may help the learner to clarify the role played by certain grammatical structures, or to verify a verb tense. As one student put it when explaining why he reverted to mental translation for grammatical analysis:
   I know all these words in here, but the order doesn’t always make the proper sentence in my mind so I kind of translate it a little bit. Since Spanish sentence structures aren’t always the same as English, I some times put them in English structure, but still using [sic] these words. (Hawras, 1996, p. 59)

5. A strategy for checking comprehension: Learners may use mental translation strategically to verify that a segment of text was accurately comprehended. So, first they strive to read and get the meaning of the text directly in the target language, and go back to perform literal translation only when necessary.
Translating While Writing

Insights about strategies for translation while writing come from a series of studies involving mental translation from the L1 (Lay, 1988; Cumming, 1989, 1990; Chelala, 1982), from translating a given text from the L1 to the L2 (Uzawa, 1996; Qi, 1998), and from translating an L1 essay into the L2 (Kobayashi and Rinnert, 1992; Brooks, 1996; Cohen and Brooks-Carson, 2001).

1. A strategy for developing and organizing ideas: Thinking through and possibly writing down the ideas in the L1 first, and then performing free translation into the L2 may ensure that the ideas are adequately complex and sophisticated. It may be that trying to think directly through the target language constrains thoughts into being simplistic in nature. In addition, learners may benefit from organizing what they want to say or write in their native language and then translating it into the target language. This way, L2 writers may come up with not only more ideas but a better sense of how to integrate them than if they try to think through their ideas in the target language.

2. A strategy for enhancing self-expression: It has also been found beneficial for some L2 writers to use translation strategically to think through the key words and phrases that they would use if they were to say or write the concepts in their native language. Rather than settling for low-level vocabulary, these writers start with the L1 words and then look for equivalent words and phrases in the target language, ideally performing free, not literal translation. What makes it a strategic activity is determining the proper fit between using their own mental lexicon (see Singleton, 1999, on the mental lexicon), a judicious use of dictionaries, and if necessary, input from a native speaker of the L1.

Note that a perfunctory use of the dictionary may not help here since dictionaries can misguide writers as much as they can help (see Neubach and Cohen, 1988).

Translating While Listening

Listening is the skill where the information stream can be the most relentless—almost as in a live lecture or movie at the movie theater. In such cases, it is not possible for learners to run back the sound a few times until unintelligible utterances are heard sufficiently well to see if they can make any sense of them. It is also a skill for which the empirical evidence with regard to translation is limited.

With regard to the strategic use of written translation during listening tasks, a prime source of empirical data would be from students attending course lectures in an L2 and then taking notes in the L1. Koren (1997) conducted a descriptive study of the lecture notes taken by 33 students who were attending EFL lectures at an Israeli law school. She found that almost all of the students chose the strategy of written translation into Hebrew L1 as they took notes because it was easier for them to remember the lecture that way and easier to study from the notes. She analyzed their notes carefully and found that the notes were functionally competent in terms of content.

Koren speculated that by listening in English and taking notes in the L1, the students may have lost more sentences on the way than if they had taken notes in the L2 directly because their mind was busy processing the translation in addition to all the other processes (e.g., perceiving the material, selecting relevant from non-essential material, performing semantic analysis, and reconstructing/summarizing the message in the L1). Yet it would appear that many of the same strategic principles as for reading in an L2 pertain in this instance. The use of free translation to L1 converted the incoming lectures to more learner-friendly material. Since Koren did not perform a controlled experiment to compare the taking of notes directly in EFL vs. taking them in the L1, we cannot make conclusions about the language of note taking. We must note in passing, though, that this was an EFL and not an ESL study. ESL note taking may prove easier, especially for students at more advanced proficiency levels and whose learning style preferences support this approach to benefiting the most from lectures.

There are also numerous occasions when learners would make use of mental translation while listening. A primary source of empirical data on strategic use of mental translation in listening comes from a study of English-L1 undergraduates in Spanish, French, or German immersed for all of their course work during an academic quarter at the University of Minnesota. The students reported their use and purpose of mental translation (Cohen and Allison, 2001). While learners wished to keep a partition between their languages and to think entirely in the target language while listening to it, these college immersion students reported from time to time that they sought equivalents in their native language. Some, if not many, nonnative listeners made mental translation of key words and phrases, much as with reading, in order to help store the concepts in the memory buffer.

A Spanish immersion undergraduate indicating the use of “a little” mental translation was emphatic about the benefits of this level of use as a strategy: “Yes, you learn and catch on so much faster and you lose much less in the translation.” Thus, a brief use of English can help consolidate a thought, before the student converts back to the target language. As another Spanish immersion student put it, “I sort of use it — just to understand a phrase. But it’s easier to just try and think in
Spanish all the time,” hence expressing a desire to maintain a partition between the languages, with preference toward staying in the target language.

Translating While Speaking

As with listening, the empirical data on language of thought in speaking is limited. A source of empirical data for this comes from a study by Cohen and Olshain which involved fifteen advanced English foreign language learners, eleven native speakers of Hebrew and four near-native speakers, who were native speakers of French, Portuguese, Spanish, and Arabic respectively (see Cohen, 1998, pp. 238-256). The students were given six speech act situations (two apologies, two complaints, and two requests) in which they were to role-play along with a native speaker. The interactions were videotaped, and after each set of two situations of the same type, the tape was played back and the respondents were asked to supply retrospective verbal reports in Hebrew by a native Hebrew-speaking investigator both fixed and probing questions regarding the factors contributing to the production of their response to that situation, including the language of thought for planning and delivering their responses. (For more on the use of verbal report as a research tool, see Cohen, 1998, pp. 34-39, 49-61.)

It was found that the use of translation in the planning and delivering of utterances turned out to be a complex matter. The most common translation pattern was to plan the utterance in Hebrew and then translate from Hebrew to English in the response. In the case of the Spanish speaker, Lily, the patterns were most complex. While her Spanish was native and dominant, and her Hebrew was excellent since she had lived in Israel for some time and was doing most of her studies in Hebrew, her English was relatively weak. In the speech act situation of apologizing to a friend for coming an hour late to a meeting, she reported planning first in Hebrew and then in Spanish, and finally translating from Spanish to English. In apologizing to a classmate for forgetting to return a book, she planned her apology in Spanish and then in Hebrew, with the response translated from Hebrew to English. In complaining to a neighbor about loud music, she planned her complaint in both Hebrew and Spanish simultaneously, with the response translated both from Hebrew and Spanish to English. What is particularly interesting about the data from this learner is that they remind us just how complex language processing can be when a learner is not simply bilingual but multilingual, with differing proficiency in the several nonnative languages.

Mental and written translation may be used strategically in speaking at different phases. Before performing a speaking task, learners may jot down translations into the L2 of specific words or key sentences. The sentences may highlight certain key grammatical features. Then while speaking, the learners may choose to monitor their output by keeping in mind the translation equivalents for certain key structures. Finally, after the speaking encounter is over, strategic learners may work back through what they said mentally and back translate several items to see if they used the language correctly. Perhaps with a learner like Lily, the case could be made for encouraging target language processing without translation as a strategy in order to avoid confusion.

DISCUSSION

This paper started by drawing two distinctions with regard to translation as performed by ESL learners – literal vs. free translation and mental vs. written translation. Second, examples of strategic use of translation were illustrated. Next, the issue of why teachers might admonish learners not to use translation was discussed, and finally empirical studies providing evidence as to the potentially positive effect of strategic translation were presented.

It would appear that efforts to identify those translation strategies that may have a positive impact on language learning and language use is still in an initial phase. More research needs to be conducted both in order to describe the strategies that are actually used and to determine how effective their use really is. While it would appear that most learners are using translation some of the time for some tasks, it is not clear how systematic they are in their use of translation. In addition, there is a need to verify the presumed links offered in this paper between learning style preferences and translation strategies used by those learners. It would also be beneficial to know the effectiveness of complex mental translation among multi-linguals at various proficiency levels and in different discourse settings, especially when turn taking happens quickly. Perhaps with multi-lingual learners, as described above, the case could be made for avoiding translation as a strategy in order to avoid confusion. But until more research is conducted, we will refrain from being prescriptive.

A caveat mentioned above will be reiterated here — that learners probably should restrict their translation to just as much of the oral or written input as they need to translate in order to maintain a sense of what the input is all about. Making sure that the bulk of the ESL processing goes on directly in English is undoubtedly a worthwhile aim. If learners put the bulk of the effort into translation — especially from the target language to the native language, it is possible that there will not be adequate psycholinguistic engagement of the language learning
mechanism in the brain. The learner may come away with a good sense of what the language input means in the native, but not necessarily with a sense of what was said or written in English. With this caveat in mind, it would seem beneficial to have learners engage in one or more training sessions in which strategic choices for both free vs. literal and mental vs. written translation are described explicitly and possible uses for each are offered. It would then be up to individual learners to apply this information to their own language learning and language use.

NOTES

1 Revised version of a paper presented at the 35th Annual TESOL Convention, St. Louis, MO, February 27-March 3, 2001. Thanks to Anne Lazaraton and three anonymous readers at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, for feedback on a previous version, and to the co-editors of the MinneWATESOL Journal for their helpful feedback on this version.

2 Baetens Beardsmore (1982) would contend that there is little empirical support for the coordinate-compound distinction.

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