

THE USE OF BACK TRANSLATIONS IN THE LINGUISTIC CLASS: TEACHING RUSSIAN THROUGH ENGLISH

UPOTREBA POV RATNOG PRIJEVODA U JEZIČNOJ NASTAVI: UČENJE RUSKOG JEZIKA KROZ ENGLESKI JEZIK

Natalia Kaloh Vid

*Filozofska fakulteta, Univerza v Mariboru, Maribor, Slovenija
Faculty of Arts, University of Maribor, Maribor, Slovenia*

Abstract

The following paper focuses on the use of back translations in the linguistic course of the Russian language. I suggest that by reading, analyzing and discussing back translations, students can improve their knowledge of Russian, learn about the functions of the language and understand how social relations of power are exercised and negotiated in and through discourses. The chapter outlines the method that was introduced in the second part of the 30-hour course, once the students were familiar with the Cyrillic alphabet and could read short sentences. English translations from Russian literary texts were chosen for the practical step of the activity. The students were asked to focus only on culturally-specific items and to translate them back to Russian. The activity's aim was to raise the students' interest and to inspire them to use their imagination. In the second step of the activity, the students shared their solutions and ideas with the teacher.

The aim of this paper is to draw attention to the possibility of including literary translations in linguistic courses as early as at the beginner's level. The paper focuses on my experience of offering literary translations as a didactic instrument, while working with the students of Russian language at the

Department for Translations Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Maribor. All the students who took the course had studied English,

Sažetak

Članak tematizira korištenje povratnog prijevoda na primjeru tečaja ruskog jezika. Radi se o čitanju i analiziranju povratnih prijevoda te o sustavnom promišljanju o prijevodu kao interkulturalnom činu, čime studenti mogu poboljšati svoje znanje ruskog jezika kao stranog jezika, upoznati se s različitim funkcijama jezika i pomoću diskurzne analize predočiti realizaciju odnosa društvene moći. Članak opisuje postupak i metodu koja je korištena u završnom dijelu 30-satnog tečaja ruskog jezika. Studenti su već usvojili osnovna znanja ćiriličnog pisma i u stanju su pročitati i razumijeti nekoliko kraćih rečenica. U empirijskom dijelu istraživanja korišteni su engleski prijevodi ruskih književnih djela. Studenti su se fokusirali na pojedine kulturno-specifične izraze i pokušali ih prevesti na ruski jezik koji je izvorni jezik književnog teksta. Cilj navedenog projekta usmjeren je na senzibiliziranje studenata za prevođenje literarnog teksta i potaknuti učesnike tečaja ruskog jezika, da prilikom prevođenja književnih djela koriste svoju maštu. Polaznici tečaja ruskog jezika svoja su prijevodna rješenja analizirali u grupi i sa voditeljem tečaja.

which was the primarily reason behind my choice of English translations from Russian. The purpose of using translation in the language course was not to train professionals but to help learners develop their knowledge of Russian. The students also learned about the processes that define translators' choices and about the importance of "translators as intercultural communication mediators" /1/.

The use of translations in foreign language class is not new. Unfortunately, translation has often received criticism as being associated mainly with a de-motivating and dull grammar-translation method. Hence, many theorists, lin-

guists and teachers have recognized that the problem is not translation as such but a teaching methodology that separates language from its communicative function. Translation was not appropriately used, despite the fact that, according to Duff, "translation happens everywhere, all the time, so why not in the classroom?" /2/. If used interactively and as a motivating activity, translation may help the learners to improve various skills. Thus Atkinson suggested that activities that involve some translation promote guessing strategies amongst students and help reduce the word-for-word translation that often occurs, resulting in inappropriate L2 use /3/. Similarly, Harbord /4/ admitted that some translation tasks teach students to work towards transferring meaning "rather than the word-for-word translation that occurs when the learner's unconscious need to make assumptions and correlations between languages is ignored." Schäffner (1998) claimed that translation and related exercises could be beneficial to foreign language learning:

1. To improve verbal agility.
2. To expand students' vocabulary in L2.
3. To develop their style.
4. To improve their understanding of how languages work.
5. To consolidate L2 structures for active use.
6. To monitor and improve comprehension of L2

Leonardi also agrees that a good translation should flow naturally, re-create both the style and the context of the original text, and follow target language conventions. As translation is regarded as a communicative activity, it involves communication between the teacher and the student /5/. Learners are encouraged "to discuss rights and wrongs as well as problems related to the translation task" /6/. Finally, properly designed translation activities can be employed to enhance the four skills and to develop three qualities essential to all language learning: accuracy, clarity and flexibility /7/. The purpose of translation activities is not to train professional translators, but to help learners acquire and strengthen their knowledge in the language.

The sample consisted of twenty-five students of both genders at a beginner's level of Russian who attended Russian classes three hours per week. All of them also studied English. The main aim of the activity was not to translate the text from English into Russian, as such a task would be

too difficult for the students and would turn the whole activity into a rather ineffectual and stress-inducing experience. Rather, in this case, the aim was to use existent English translations from Russian to figure out which words and short expressions were used in the original, thus activating students' creative thinking, expanding their vocabulary and offering them an opportunity to practice the Cyrillic alphabet. Among a great number of strategies to adopt when using translation as a technique, I was particularly drawn to the necessity of using interesting yet clear and explicit examples. On the other hand, I wanted to use a literary text and to focus on the translations of culturally-specific elements. For this purpose, I chose Mikhail Bulgakov's novel "The Master and Margarita," which has been translated into English six times (twice in 1967, in 1995, 1997, 2006 and 2008). Though it would seem more logical to use the Slovenian translations of the same text, I decided to use the English translations, as the Slovene translation is domesticated to a greater extent and significantly more culturally adapted, while my intention was to offer the students the examples of transliterations, calques and literary translation. Though the choice of a literary text for the students with a beginner's knowledge of Russian may seem pretentious, the examples from the various translations used for the activity were short, linguistically-simple, explicit and clear. My concern was that I used translations of sentences taken out of context, which made it easier for the students. Each example contained a culturally-specific element, a word or a short phrase, which the students were supposed to guess and to write their solutions in Russian. These elements were signified in bold, so that the students recognized them immediately. My concern was that students often experience major difficulties when encountering culture-bound elements and get lost if they are required to demonstrate a considerable level of cultural background relating to the target language. For this purpose, we discussed culturally-specific elements selected for this task beforehand. Before the beginning of the activity, I also introduced the content of the novel and discussed briefly the history of the novel's translation into English. The first group of examples consisted of words and expressions translated by means of transliteration. In this case, the students' only task was to transliterate it back into Russian correctly. For the second group, I chose examples of calques and literary transla-

tions. For each group of examples, the translation strategy was clearly marked on the handouts in order to avoid confusion. The activity was practically constructed. In the first step, I asked the students to read the translations carefully and try to figure out which words or expressions had been used in the original. Students could work in pairs and it was suggested that they should use the translation strategies as main guidelines. Naturally, the term "figure out," which suggested a form of play with the text, attracted students' attention. It also gave them assurance of their knowledge of Russian, since solutions were not offered to them but needed to be discovered. The students found it motivating that I trusted their linguistic abilities, but were also encouraged to use dictionaries to translate words or expression if they could not figure them out. This part of the activity promoted guessing strategies amongst students and encouraged them to work towards transferring meaning. In the second step, we analyzed the students' solutions and discussed the cultural connotations. Though in several cases the students faced difficulties with transliteration, they deciphered most of the words and expressions and we discussed the importance of a proper transfer of culturally-specific elements. In the final stage of the activity we discussed the results. The students expressed interest in the activity and reported that they found the method beneficial. They enjoyed the atmosphere of support and student-centered learning. They were motivated to work with vocabulary and to think about how a certain culturally-specific element functioned in the context. This strategy allowed students to expand their vocabulary. The activity also involved a high degree of involvement on the part of the students, as they were encouraged to be creative and to share their ideas. The students also had an opportunity to learn about Russian culture. Students worked independently of the teacher, as the method allowed them interpretative freedom. The only requirement was to understand the meaning of the words. I used the same activity several times before the course was finished.

References

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Appendix:

Translation activity

Aim: Raising linguistic awareness/learning new vocabulary/practicing Cyrillic

Step 1: Ask the students to read the translations as closely as possible and to identify which word, compound or short expression occurred in the original. Encourage them to use dictionary if necessary.

Step 2: The students share their ideas with the teacher and the rest of the group.

Step 3: The students discuss the translation strategies in small groups and try to agree on the best version. The students also discuss the use of explanatory endnotes.

Examples for the analysis:

Translations strategy: transliteration

- Ginsburg: This Kant ought to be sent to **Solovki** for three years for such arguments! (1967: 8)
- Aplin: Margarita Nikolaevna never touched a **Primus**. (2008: 222)
- Aplin: /.../ at the mirrored doors of **Torgsin** /.../ (2008: 353)
- Burgin and O'Connor: **pyramidon** (1995: 65)

Translation strategy: calquing

- Burgin and O'Connor: [...] in the **financial director's** office (1995: 67)
- Pevear and Volokhonsky: Take a **super-lightning telegram**. (1997: 107)

Translation strategy: literal translation

- a. Ginsburg: Margarita Nikolaevna did not know the horrors of living in a **communal apartment**. (1967: 236)
- b. Aplin: The **Narzan** that fizzed in your throat! (2008: 66)
- c. Burgin and O'Connor: /.../ a Russian woman, a **member of the Komsomol**. (1995: 10)
- d. Burgin and O'Connor: Margarita Nikolayevna was ignorant of the horrors of life in a **communal apartment**. (1995: 186)
- e. Ginsburg: At this moment two **citizens** entered the dining room, followed by a very pale Pelageya Antonovna. (1967: 113).
- f. Aplin: Nikanor Ivanovich Bosoi is **speculating in foreign currency**. (2008: 100)
- g. Aplin: "It's nice on the Klyazma now," Navigator George was winding the company up, knowing that the **literary dacha village** of Pereyginovo on the River Klyazma was a shared sore point. (2008: 57)