

# TRANSLATION AND THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH IN THAILAND

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“Translation” seems to be popularly employed by Thai teachers of English as the main teaching technique in all levels of education throughout the kingdom.

Three years ago, while I was working for the Ministry of Education, my duty allowed me to make various visits to secondary schools in every part of the kingdom. One of the main purposes of the trips was to observe English classes conducted by both Thai teachers and Peace Corps volunteers. From my observations, I learned that the Thai teachers used a lot of Thai to explain the grammatical function of English words and English structures, and to translate reading texts and some comprehension questions for their students. Some Peace Corps volunteers, sometimes, also used Thai, Flavoured with American accent, to translate simple questions like, “What’s your name?” to elicit prompt response.

Recently, I had an opportunity to unofficially observe university English classes. I found that teachers of English in the tertiary level also use a lot of Thai to teach reading, writing, literature and other related academic English subjects like-linguistics. And quite often Thai translation is used in English speaking classes, too.

I am not totally opposed to the use of Thai in English classes as long as the teacher knows exactly what he is doing, and is sure that this will lead his students to meet the objective of the course. This is because at present, although we know a lot more about learning processes and learning psychology, no-one can be absolutely sure of how a second language is acquired. Most of the reliable teaching techniques known to us seem to be based partly on experience and observation of how the first language is acquired, and partly on either of the two currently favoured learning theories--the cognitive code theory and the operant conditioning theory. Therefore, it is up to us, teachers of second or foreign language, to make an investigation into all the teaching techniques available to find out the most suitable one or ones that can be used effectively with our own students, and that can ensure most success.

In my opinoin, to rely mainly on translation techniques may not be adequate since any technique has its own advantages and disadvantages. Translation techniques are no exception. Some of the advantages of translation techniques are listed as follows :

- a) Students understand immediately what is being communicated by the teacher. Nothing can be more frustrating than feeling left out of the entire lesson because they did not understand the directions at the beginning.
- b) Student's comprehension of the reading text is high, which can easily lead them into a further discussion about text organization, topic sentence, main ideas, supporting details, etc.
- c) Interaction among students and between teacher and students is high. This is because they feel more competent to communicate in their mother tongue, and are not afraid of being laughed at.
- d) A lot of detailed instructions concerning grammar, vocabulary, and other relevant explanations to be memorised by the students can be given in a shorter time and in a more straightforward manner.
- e) Other aspects of language can be easily explained and seemingly well understood by the students. These aspects include the prosodic features like, stress patterns, rhythm, intonation, and other stylistic features and culture features.
- f) The teacher's task can cover over everything stated in the curriculum and can be completed within the specified time.
- g) The teacher's preparation requires less time and energy. Not many props are needed.
- h) Presentation and classroom organisation can be easily handled.

I have also listed below some of the disadvantages found whenever translation techniques are used as the main approach to teach a language.

- a) Students receive inadequate practice in the target language.
- b) Students tend to look for words and expressions in their native language which would correspond exactly in meaning with words and expressions in the target language. These can be rarely found.
- c) Students will have to work on a much more complicated task, that is instead of directly associating the target language with objects or thoughts, they will have to translate it first.
- d) Words and expressions that have to be translated seem bloodless and lifeless. They act as part of a dead language that cannot actively convey meaning in a real situation. What students are convinced is that only their native language is real and alive.
- e) Students will almost never be able to use the target language for self-initiated communication because of lacking examples of active use of the language, and because of their being confused by varieties of meaning of a word when translated into Thai.

For example, the phrase “a glass” appears in the two sentences below but it cannot be exactly translated into Thai.

A glass of water will do you good.

A glass is a container which is usually used for drinking.

And now compare “a” in the two sentences above with the one in the sentence below.

She’s got a headache.

We can clearly see from these three sentences that some words can be translated when used in certain sentences and cannot be translated when used in others. Or they can be translated but in different words, not entirely consistent with the one translated before.

- f) Listening and speaking skills are poorly taught. It is hard for the students to acquire listening skills because they do not have to make any effort in order to figure out what is being said, and they never hear the target language spoken in a fully developed discourse. The same is also true in acquiring speaking skills. Students never feel a need to use the target language for communication.
- g) Students are taught more about the language and how to use the language : therefore, they are taught less to use the language directly for communication purposes.
- h) Students become rule-conscious. Whenever they want to say or write something in the target language they will have to refer to the rules they have been taught existing to govern the language. This will cause the students to be very unnatural in using the language.

Translation as a teaching technique in the classroom is usually found in a form of word-by-word translation. It is not a complete method, and its application is often haphazard. Unless the teacher is competent in both the target language and the student’s native language, and knows how to handle the lesson skillfully, the student may be confused and led astray after a few lessons.

I usually use the following as a guideline whenever I think about using translation techniques.

Use translation techniques when :

1. the language item is in a high-order of abstraction and it is impossible to be tackled by any other ways.
2. the language item involves culture which is different from the one known to the students.
3. it is quicker and more helpful to the student’s learning strategies.
4. practical rules need to be summed up.

Every year I often find a lot of my students write English sentences which are exactly word-by-word translation versions of some Thai sentences. This may result from overusing the translation techniques. For example, the word “ever” is always translated as “เคย” in Thai. And my students usually come up with sentences like, “I ever went to Chiang Mai last year”, when they want it to mean, “I went to Chiang Mai last year”. And they write, “Do you ever go to England?” when they want it to mean, “Have you ever been to England?” Obviously, these two sentences are word-by-word translation of, “ผมเคยไปเชียงใหม่ที่แล้ว” and “คุณเคยไปอังกฤษไหม” Another interesting example is, “I eat rice in the morning at 7:30” Although the sentence is grammatically correct, it does not convey the meaning intended, and is rather odd. Most of the students who write this sentence want to say, “I have breakfast at 7:30.” And again it is a word-by-word translation of “ฉันกินข้าวเช้าเวลา 7 โมงครึ่ง”

There will be a lot more directly-translated-from-Thai English sentences which are created by students, if one has enough time to sit and think about them. If they are grammatically correct and convey the intended meaning, it is all right. But what about the sentences which are rather odd and do not exactly convey the intended meaning? The students have already learnt them, which means it is hard for them to be corrected. We would be very unhappy indeed if their mistakes were caused by our teaching techniques. But, in fact, they might well be.