

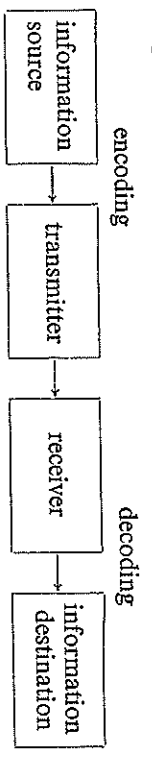
Translation and the Teaching of Meaning: Some Techniques

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THE MEANINGS of words can be communicated or taught in many different ways. The following list includes most of the possibilities.

1. By demonstration
 - (i) using an object
 - (ii) using a cut-out figure
 - (iii) using gesture
 - (iv) performing an action
2. By pictures
 - (v) photographs
 - (vi) blackboard drawings
 - (vii) pictures from books
3. By verbal explanation
 - (viii) description
 - (ix) giving a word with the same meaning
 - (x) giving a word of opposite meaning
 - (xi) putting the new word in a defining context
 - (xii) translating into another language

These techniques are only ways of teaching the meanings of words. This is apparent if we look at the teaching of meaning from the viewpoint of communication theory:



In vocabulary teaching the information source may be the teacher's brain. The transmitter can be many things, for example, the teacher's voice (if he gives a verbal explanation), his hands (if he draws or points to a picture), his body (if he gives a demonstration), a real object (if he shows it to the class), and so on. Unless the teacher changes the meaning that he has in his brain (the information source) into something that can be perceived (via the transmitter), no communication (and thus no learning), can take place. This changing, or encoding, is usually an unsatisfactory process. Indeed, it is one of the weaknesses of all communication. We know what we want to say, but we cannot say it exactly and clearly. It is difficult to find an exact correspondence between the idea in our head and a way of expressing it. Direct communication from brain to brain (from

information source to information destination) is ideal but does not normally occur. Instead, we must be satisfied with indirect communication through the intermediaries of the transmitter and receiver, and the processes of encoding and decoding.


Thus the meaning of a word exists only at the information source and the information destination. This meaning can only be perceived by someone else if it is encoded. The encoding usually results in something not exactly the same as the meaning. Our idea of a chair and a real chair are not the same. A particular example of a chair, for example, the one I am sitting on now, is brown. It is made of wood. It has two arms. These features are irrelevant for the idea of a chair. Chairs need not be made of wood, be brown, and have two arms. A real chair is probably a bad example of the idea (or meaning) of a chair for teaching purposes because the real chair has so many distracting features that are not essential to the idea of a chair. For the teacher, a real chair is an encoding of the idea of a chair.

If we wish, we can use the word *translation* instead of *encoding*. A real chair is a *translation* of the idea of a chair into something that can be seen. If the teacher describes a chair, his description is a translation of the idea of a chair into something that can be heard or read. We can translate the idea of a chair in many ways. We can translate it into a real chair, gestures with our hands, a drawing, a photograph, a description in English, or a description or word in the learner's mother-tongue. A translation into the mother tongue represents the same processes as translation into a picture, a description in English, and so on.

Some people often criticise translation into the mother tongue as a way of communicating or teaching meaning. Their objections are generally like this (see for example the introduction to *A Picture Vocabulary* by L. A. Hill, O.U.P., 1965):

1. There is usually no exact correspondence between one language and another.
2. Translation into the mother tongue is indirect.
3. The use of the mother tongue takes time which could better be spent in using English.

All of these criticisms are true. But they can also be applied to the use of pictures, drawings, demonstration, and the use of real objects. For example, a picture for one group of learners does not always have the same meaning as it does for the teacher. The use of a picture to convey meaning is indirect because it requires decoding. Time spent using pictures could be better spent in using English. So, if translation in the narrow sense of translation into the mother tongue has no place in the classroom, then translation in the broad sense of encoding also has no place in the classroom, and this is clearly absurd.

At the beginning of this article there is a list of the many ways of communicating meaning. Is any one better than the others? Let us take an example. *Fork* is a useful English word. Its meaning can be communicated by showing a real fork, showing a picture of a fork, drawing a fork, explaining what a fork is, putting the word in a context, or by translating the word into the mother tongue. For the word *fork*, translation into the mother-tongue is unsatisfactory because in most Asian languages the mother-tongue word will refer only to a fork used for eating, and perhaps to the fork of a bicycle. A picture of a fork and a real fork are just as limiting. They will not include a fork in the road, a fork in a branch and so on. Perhaps the most suitable translation for *fork* is a drawing like this — . This probably most closely approximates the idea of a fork that most native speakers of English have. Certainly it fits most of the uses of *fork* in English.

It is apparent that other ways of communicating the meaning will be more suitable for other words. There is no rule that one type of encoding is better than another. Each has to be considered on its merits. How well does it translate the idea in the information source?

Translation into the mother tongue, however, has certain features that can be used by the teacher to the learners' advantage. Here is a list of the main advantages, with some teaching techniques that make use of them.

(a) Translation can be done quickly. This is a disadvantage if the teacher wants to spend time on a word so that the learners will be sure to remember it. The speed of translation is an advantage, however, if the teacher wants to pass quickly over an unimportant word in a reading text. By giving the meaning quickly, using translation, the teacher has satisfied the learners and has avoided spending too much time on an unimportant word.

(b) Translation is not limited like pictures and objects to nouns, adjectives, and verbs. It can be used to explain many different types of words. Here are some techniques for doing this:

The teacher can write about twelve mother-tongue words on the blackboard. He then says an English word which is new to the learners and has much the same meaning as one of the mother-tongue words on the board. A learner comes to the front of the class and just by guessing tries to point to the mother-tongue word that should go with the word the teacher is saying. When the learner has guessed correctly, the teacher then says another word and the learner tries to guess again. This continues until all the words have been correctly guessed. Thus, the teacher can teach the meanings of several new words by translating, but also by making the learners listen closely to what he says and trying to guess.

The mother-tongue translations of several new words in a reading passage in English are given in a list after the reading passage. The learners must search for the English words in the passage and write them next to their translations. This exercise is made easier for the learners if

- (i) the translations are in the same order as the English words in the passage
- (ii) the line or paragraph number of the appropriate English word in the passage is given next to the appropriate translation.
- (iii) next to each translation there is a short line for each letter in the appropriate English word, for example, - - - - - walaupun (the correct answer is *although*)
- (iv) the first letter of the appropriate English word is given next to the translation, for example, a _____ walaupun or a - - - - - walaupun

The learners make small cards about 3 cms. by 5 cms. On one side of each card there is an English word. On the other side there is the translation of that word. Each learner has a set of cards. He looks at the English word and tries to think of the translation. Then he turns the card over to see if he was correct. By doing this for a short time each day, the learners can quickly increase their recognition vocabulary.

(c) The teacher can ask the learners to respond by using translation to see if they have understood something he presented in another way. Except where the teacher provides a multiple-choice list of definitions or pictures, there is not really any other way in which the learners can respond freely, quickly, and easily to show they have understood something. Here are some techniques where the learners use the mother tongue to show they have understood.

The teacher gives the meaning of a new word by putting it in context. 'A hose is usually quite long. A hose is usually made of rubber or plastic. Some hoses are made of strong thick cloth. A hose is round, etc.' When the learners think that they have got the meaning of *hose*, they raise their hands and the teacher asks one of them to give the translation.

The learners close their eyes. The teacher makes a noise with an object by hitting or rubbing it against something. At the same time he says the English name of the object. The learners have to guess the meaning of the English name by listening to the sound the object makes. When they think they know, they give the translation of the English word.

The learners' eyes are covered with a piece of cloth and the teacher gives them figures of things cut out of wood or thick cardboard. At the same time the teacher says the English name many times. The learners try to guess the meaning of the English word by feeling the cut-out shape. When they know they translate the English word. Words like the names of fruit, numbers, the names of animals, and the names of many different objects can be taught in this way.

The teacher performs an action to show the meaning of a word. He also says the English word or writes it on the board. The learners try to translate the English word as a result of looking at the teacher's action.

Translation can be used to check that learners understand certain spoken or written sentences. For example, after a reading passage, the teacher can give a list of mother-tongue sentences. The learners have to match these sentences with the appropriate English sentences in the passage.

It is true that the use of translation as a way of teaching meaning has its drawbacks. It is usually too quick, it takes away time that could have been used to expose the learners to English, often there are not exact equivalents of English words in the mother tongue.

However, translation shares these drawbacks with other ways of conveying meaning. It is necessary to look at translation as just one of many similar ways of presenting meaning. By careful use of translation in suitable teaching techniques many of these drawbacks can be avoided.

The exclusion of the mother tongue from the classroom as a way of communicating meaning robs the teacher of one useful technique of encoding. It also leaves the learners to make their own uncontrolled and often incorrect translations. It is worth mentioning two other possible effects. Exclusion of the mother tongue is often seen by the learners as a criticism of the mother tongue as a language, thus making it seem like 'a second-grade language'. The effects of this 'degrading' of the mother tongue are not beneficial to the mother tongue nor to the people who use it. Secondly, learning a foreign or second language provides an opportunity for learning about the nature of language, how a language works, how different languages organise the world and experience in different ways. Comparison between the mother tongue and the foreign language is a good way of doing this.