TRANSLATION AS A TESTING TECHNIQUE
— WHAT IS GOING ON IN RATERS’ MIND? —

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Translation is one of the oldest and most-frequently-used techniques in second language testing. There are, however, arguments against the use of translation as a testing technique. In this paper, we will first briefly analyze the disadvantages and advantages of translation tests, and then discuss the data obtained from our research on the process of rating translation.

‘Translation’ can be defined as ‘act of expressing the meaning of an expression in another language’ or the ‘product of translating.’ It can be classified in terms of direction and languages involved. Since there are two languages involved in translation, there are two possible directions, i.e. from the native (first) language (L1) to the target (second) language (L2), and from L2 to L1. In this paper we will exclusively refer to the latter. Specification of the languages involved is also important. It is fairly understandable that there would be differences between translation from, say, English to German and that from English to Japanese, since English and German are linguistically closer to each other than English and Japanese. In this paper we will limit ourselves to the discussion of translation from English to Japanese.

1. Background

(1) Shortcomings of translation as a testing technique

The use of translation as a teaching and testing technique has often been the target of criticism. In this section we will clarify some shortcomings of translation tasks as a means of measuring learners’ understanding of a written text.

(a) Validity of the task

Translation tasks require examinees to be involved in two different activities at the same time, i.e. understanding the target sentence expressed in the target language and expressing its meaning in their native language, thus there may be cases where:

i) the examinee can understand the target sentence but cannot express it’s meaning in his or her
native language.

ii) the examinee cannot understand the target sentence but can express its meaning in his or her native language with the help of translating techniques.

(b) Validity of the rating

It is often difficult for raters (evaluators) to gain a consensus on the rating criteria. There may be differences in their preference of:

i) the type of translation i.e. structure-based as opposed to meaning-based translation. The former refers to literal, word-for-word translation in which the structure of the original sentence is easily traceable, whereas the latter refers to the type of translation that represents the general meaning of the original (L2) and sounds natural in the native language (L1).

ii) the type of rating i.e. holistic as opposed to analytic evaluation. The former refers to evaluating the quality of translation by impression, where emphasis is placed on the examinee’s general understanding of the original, while in the latter the rater either divides a sentence into parts and gives points to each part of the translation, or gives points to different aspects of the translation (e.g. structure, meaning of words, naturalness, etc.).

(c) Reliability of rating criteria

Since evaluation of translations cannot be free from subjectivity, it is often pointed out that the rating is liable to change according to different occasions (hence difficulty to achieve a high level of intra-rater reliability) and to different raters (hence low inter-rater reliability).

(d) Feasibility

Translation tests are time-consuming. It takes time for examinees to translate a passage from L2 to L1 and for raters to grade the translation, with the result that only a limited portion of a passage can be used for a translation task.

(e) Backwash effect

It is generally recognizable that tests affect learner’s way of studying. This type of influence is often called ‘backwash effect’ (a.k.a. ‘washback’ effect). It is defined as ‘the way an exam or test influences teaching and learning in the classroom’ (Heaton 1990). It is highly likely that the translation tasks in the tests may affect the learner’s way of communicating in the target language. It is often pointed out that too much practice in translation leads the learner to persistently rely on their native language when communicating in the target language. This process is time-consuming and quite likely to hinder normal communication, particularly in casual conversation, where quick responses are vital for successful communication.

To sum up, translation can be criticized i) in theory as invalid and unreliable, and ii) in practice as unfeasible and having adverse effects.

(2) Advantages of translation as a testing technique

With all the above-mentioned disadvantages of translation tests, there are some arguments in favor of the technique. For example, translation is preferable when the understanding of words or phrases are to
be measured, especially in cases where the meaning of the target word is almost equivalent to its L1 counterpart. If a Japanese teacher of English wants to know whether his or her students understand the meaning of 'dog,' the easiest way is to ask them to put it into Japanese.

Another argument that favors translation is that no other testing techniques have been proved to be superior to translation. Seemingly more reliable techniques such as true-or-false or multiple-choice have as many minuses as translation. The following seems particularly important.

(a) It is very difficult to come up with correct answers in a multiple-choice test. A quick analysis of some existing multiple-choice reading comprehension tests reveals that in some cases we can successfully find the correct answer without understanding (or even reading) the text, and that in other cases we find it difficult to find the correct answer even if the passage itself is easily understandable, because the questions or the alternative answers offered in the test items are difficult or equivocal. It seems that questions and alternatives provided to the examinees can help them to find or hinder them from finding a correct answer.

(b) There is the question of how many points should be given when the learner has chosen a distracter. It would be best that each distracter should be given due weight when rating. If all the distracters are treated as equivalent (i.e. as noughts), then there arises another question of whether the score obtained from the test can be regarded as an interval scale.

(c) True-or-false questions can be regarded as unreliable (thus invalid) because chances are very high that the examinee can answer correctly even if he or she does not understand a sentence or passage, since each item has only two possible answers.

A translation test can defuse all these problems. It can measure the examinees' comprehension of a text without the risk of giving them either clues or hindrances.

2. A Study on the process of rating translation

(1) Rationale

In order to examine the validity of a translation test as a means of measuring learners' understanding of a given text, there needs to be a valid test that can measure the understanding of the given text. It is obvious, however, that every single testing technique has its own advantages and disadvantages and that there cannot be any one and only perfect method to measure the extent of the learners' understanding. The question is, therefore, not whether translation is a desirable test method but i) what kind of sentences or passages best suit or do not suit the translation test, and ii) how to establish reasonable standards for rating the translation. We believe that there are two approaches to these questions.

(a) Strong version: Validation

If it is impossible to establish 'objective' criteria which can be agreed by everyone, the only possible alternative is to establish criteria based on 'intersubjectivity' among 'eligible voters' (i.e. those criteria that are approved by as many well-trained, experienced raters as possible). Herein eligibility can be determined in terms of the rater's English proficiency, teaching experience, and test-making experience.
This approach includes both the selection of types of English sentences or passages and the criteria for evaluation.

(b) Weak version: Survey

As the first step to validate translation tests, we need to know the actual rating process by raters. This includes i) what type of texts are regarded as suitable for translation, and ii) what criteria are regarded as suitable for the evaluation of the translation. Since there are few empirical data available at present concerning the type of texts and rating criteria suitable for translation tests, we believe it is highly recommendable to find out more about translation tests before going further.

(2) Research design

(a) Purpose

The purpose of this research is i) to investigate what type of sentences are regarded as suitable for translation by teachers of English, and ii) on what criteria they rate translation.

(b) Subjects

The subjects of this study were 19 Japanese EFL teachers who had at least five years of English teaching experience. 10 junior college teachers and 9 high school teachers were chosen.

(c) Materials

i) Passages

In order to investigate the teachers’ preference of sentences to be used for a translation task, we used four passages from the latter part of the second grade version of the STEP Test (known as Eiken), which is the most prevalent English proficiency test in Japan (See Appendix I). The choice was made based on our impression regarding the difficulty level of the sentences that the subjects were used to.

ii) Sentences

In order to investigate the process of evaluating, we prepared ten short but complicated English sentences, each of which contained grammatical features such as relative clause, passive voice, non-human subject, and so on (see Appendix II).

The English sentences were also chosen based on two major criteria which were considered as important in translation: meaning and structure. In this study, ‘meaning’ can be defined as information contained in an English sentence. We assumed that a translation would be considered as ‘semantically correct’ when all the necessary information was completely given in a sentence in the native language. One of our concerns was the extent to which the raters considered meaning as an important factor in translation.

The definition of ‘structure’ is slightly complicated. As was mentioned in 1-(1)-(b)-i) of this paper, a target sentence or passage can be translated at least in two ways, i.e. structure-based and meaning-based translation. In this study, the English sentences were chosen so that they could be translated in both ways. Both types of translation can be regarded as equally correct, depending on the situations, but we assumed that a translation would be considered as ‘faithful to the original’ when the structure of the target sentence can be traceable.
We also prepared five Japanese sentences for each English sentence, thus the number of Japanese sentences prepared for this study was fifty. They had the following characteristics.

1) The meaning is correct and the structure is faithful to the original  
   (+M, +S)
2) The meaning is correct but the structure is not faithful to the original  
   (+M, -S)
3) The meaning is not correct but the structure is faithful to the original  
   (-M, +S)
4) The meaning is not correct and the structure is not faithful to the original  
   (-M, -S)
5) Dummy

(d) Procedure
i) First, we presented each subject with four English passages and asked them to select four sentences (or parts of sentences) that they would like their students to translate. They could choose the four sentences from one or all of the passages as long as the number of sentences totaled four.

ii) Then we presented them with ten English sentences with five translated versions below each and asked them to rate the fifty Japanese sentences on a 10 point scale based on their own criteria.

iii) At the end of the session we asked them to explain the reasons for their selection of the sentences and the criteria of their rating of each Japanese sentence.

(e) Data analysis
We analyzed:

i) their reasons for the sentences the subjects selected;

ii) the characteristics of 1) the translated sentences which were rated with the least variance, and 2) those which were rated with the most variance.

3. Results and Discussion

(1) Where to translate
The following sentences were considered as most suitable for the translation task by the subjects.
This data shows that main reasons that they chose a sentence for translation were i) structure and ii) the semantic status of the sentence in the passage.

(a) *It was not until the steam engine came into use that man had a really reliable source of power for his machinery.* (Chosen by 19 subjects)
   Major reasons are:
   i) Want to know students’ understanding of the ‘not until’ structure. (15 subjects)
   ii) This sentence is difficult to translate. (4 subjects)
   iii) This sentence concludes the whole passage. (3 subjects)
(b) *Being unskilled, they try to find jobs at whatever level they can, doing however much they can.* (Chosen by 13 subjects)
   Major reasons are:
   i) Want to know students’ understanding of the participial construction. (9 subjects)
   ii) Want to know students’ understanding of compound relative pronoun. (5 subjects).
iii) This sentence is difficult to translate. (2 subjects)
iv) This sentence is important in understanding the whole passage. (2 subjects)
(c) Computer technology now allows writers to edit their work without retyping the original draft.
(Chosen by 8 subjects)
Major reasons are:
i) Want to know students’ understanding of the ‘non-human subject + allow + object + to do’ structure. (7 subjects)
ii) This sentence is difficult to translate. (2 subjects)
iii) Want to know students’ understanding of ‘without + -ing’ structure. (2 subjects)
(d) As they grow older and more competent, most of them get jobs, probably still unskilled but more closely tied to their fields of interest. (Chosen by 8 subjects)
Major reasons are:
i) Want to know students’ understanding of the structure. (3 subjects)
ii) This sentence is important in understanding the whole passage. (3 subjects)

(2) Rating criteria
The result of the second part of this research (how teachers evaluate different types of translation) is shown in table 1.

The data showed that all the subjects tended to give higher points to the sentences with correct meaning. As for structural correctness, on the other hand, the raters differed in the evaluation of error gravity. Some subjects gave several points to a Japanese sentence whose meaning was incorrect but structurally faithful to the original. Other subjects, however, rated the same sentences more severely. One of the subjects gave no points at all.

It was discovered that the raters seem to have fairly similar criteria regarding the meaning of the translations. However, their rating criteria seem to differ considerably in terms of structural representation. It may be possible to say that translation technique is useful especially when the teachers want to measure the comprehension of the meaning of a target sentence, whereas caution is necessary when they want to measure the structural understanding of the sentence.

Although there seems to be much more room for improvement in terms of design of this experiment, it would be worth conducting more and more empirical studies to obtain more ‘facts’ about translation. With more facts about translation, discussion and debate would definitely be much more fruitful.

References

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**Table 1.** Letters A to S represent the subjects who joined this research.

**AV:** Age/race; **SD:** Standard Deviation; **-DUMMY:** See 2(2)-(c)-(ii).
Appendix 1

Passages for selecting the sentences to be used for translation task.

1) The development of the personal computer has made life easier for authors, journalists, and other writers. Computer technology now allows writers to edit their work without retyping the original draft. Computer word-processing programs can perform routine chores such as finding mistakes in spelling and sometimes punctuation and grammar. Also, manuscripts can be saved in files in the computer's memory. Writers must be careful, though because computer files can be accidentally erased with the touch of a button. To avoid problems, extra copies of documents should be saved on external disks or in written form. Otherwise, weeks or months of work can easily be lost.

2) In America, university costs have gone up sharply over the last ten years. Many students earn a good portion of their college fees by working during their summer vacations at all kinds of jobs - waiter or waitress, babysitter, camp counselor, or construction worker. They are not concerned with status. Being unskilled, they try to find jobs at whatever level they can, doing however much they can. They seek not only money, but experience. They learn good work habits, responsibility, the ability to take orders, and how to get along with a boss and different kinds of people. As they grow older and more competent, most of them get better jobs, probably still unskilled but more closely tied to their fields of interest.

3) The Japanese people are internationally famous for their artistic skill with flowers. Flower arrangement, or ikebana as it is called, has its roots in the 6th century. Flower arrangement started in China with Buddhist monks, who used flowers in their temples. When Buddhism was introduced to Japan in the 6th century, Japanese monks gave special thought to arranging temple flowers artistically. As time went on, however, flower arrangement became the pastime of many people of the upper class such as nobles, feudal lords, and samurai warriors. In the 15th century flower arrangement developed into an aristocratic art form. Today it has become a popular pastime enjoyed by many people throughout the world.

4) The new inventions and machines of the 18th century gave people new opportunities. However, these inventions could not become fully useful until men had succeeded in finding sources of power from nature to replace their own muscles. Windmills as a source of power had been well known for centuries, but they were too unreliable to work the new machinery. Water power proved to be more reliable. But even water power had its minuses. Factories had to be built along rivers; if the rivers froze over in winter or became dry in summer, manufacturing operations had to be stopped. It was not until the steam engine came into use that man had a really reliable source of power for his machinery.
Appendix II

The sentences and the different types of translation used to find out teachers’ rating criteria

1. My first thought when the truth was exposed was to avoid losing face.
   a) 本当に明らかにされたときの最初の思考は顔を失うことを避けることだった。
   b) 本当に明らかにされたときに最初に考えたのは、面目を失わないようにすることだった。
   c) 面目は失いたくないということが真実が明らかになって最初に考えたことだった。
   d) いつ真実が明らかにされたかを最初に考えることによって、面目を失わずにすむ。
   e) 真実はエクスポーズされたときの最初に考えたのは顔を失うのアボイドすることだった。

2. The new device enables us to finish the work in five minutes.
   a) その新しい装置は私たちがその仕事を5分で終えることを妨げる。
   b) その新しい装置は私たちがその仕事を5分で終えることを可能にする。
   c) その新しい装置はその仕事を5分で終えることができない。
   d) その新しい装置によって私たちはその仕事を5分で終えることができる。
   e) その新しいディバイスは、私たちはその仕事を5分で終えることを可能にする。

3. A closer examination will reveal that these two cultures are related to each other.
   a) より詳しい調査が、これらの2つの文化が関連していることを明かすだろう。
   b) よりクローズな試験が、2つのカルチャーが互いに関係しているのをリビールするだろう。
   c) より近い試験が、これら2つの文化が関係していることを再び明かすだろう。
   d) より近い試験が2つの文化を示し、それは互いに関係している。
   e) もっと詳しく調べればこれら2つの文化が互いに関係していることが分かるだろう。

4. All you have to do is hold your tongue.
   a) あなたは舌を持っていればよいのだ。
   b) あなたはしなければならないすべては、黙っていることである。
   c) あなたは自分のトングを持っていればよいのだ。
   d) あなたはしなければならないすべては、舌を持つことである。
   e) あなたは黙っているべきだ。

5. Ms. Brown accused the boy of copying another student’s homework.
   a) ブラウン先生が非難したのは別の生徒が宿題を写していた。
   b) ブラウン先生は、その少年がほかの生徒の宿題を写したことで非難した。
   c) ブラウン先生は、ほかの生徒の宿題をコピーしたことをアキュースした。
   d) ブラウン先生は、その少年がほかの生徒の宿題をコピーしたことに気づいた。
   e) ブラウン先生は、ほかの生徒の宿題を写した少年を非難した。

6. It might be said that not a day passes without a traffic accident.
   a) 交通事故なしには1日たりとも過ぎないと言ってもよい。
   b) 交通事故なしに1日たりとも過ぎないと言ってもよい。
   c) 交通事故は毎日起きていると言ってよい。
   d) 交通渋滞なしに1日が始まることはないと言ってよい。
e) 毎日が交通渋滞で始まると言ってよい。

7. It was because of the rain that the bus was crowded.
   a) 雨のせいでバスが込んでいた。
   b) 雨のせいでバスがクラウドさせられた。
   c) バスが込んでいたのは雨のせいである。
   d) 雨のせいでバスは運休した。
   e) バスが止まったのは雨のせいである。

8. My uncle stood with his arms folded thinking about his family in his hometown.
   a) 叔父はホームタウンのファミリーのことを思いながら、腕をフォールドして立っていた。
   b) 叔父は、故郷の家族のことを考えながら組まれた腕と一緒に立っていた。
   c) 叔父は立ったまま足を組み、故郷の両親のことを考えていた。
   d) 叔父は立ったまま腕を組み、故郷の家族のことを考えていた。
   e) 叔父は、故郷の家族のことを思いながら、腕を組んで立っていた。

9. The girl Screaming behind John and Tom is Nancy.
   a) ジョンとトムの後ろで手を振っている女の子はナンシーです。
   b) ジョンとトムの後ろで女の子が手を振っていて、その子はナンシーです。
   c) ジョンとトムの後ろで女の子が叫んでいて、その子はナンシーです。
   d) ジョンとトムの後ろで叫んでいる女の子はナンシーです。
   e) ジョンとトムの後ろでスクリームしている女の子はナンシーです。

10. I have a friend whose father is a politician.
   a) 私には父がポリティシャンである友人がいる。
   b) 私には友人がいて、彼の父は政治家である。
   c) 私には友人がいて、彼の父は社長である。
   d) 私には父が社長である友人がいる。
   e) 私には父が政治家である友人がいる。