

The Use of Equivalency and Translatability as Cognitive Tool in Correct Teaching and Learning English Idioms

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Abstract:

Translation can be a very useful and helpful tool to the teachers and students who teach/learn idioms by opening the doors to better teaching and learning strategies. Moreover it is seen as an important part of learning process when dealing with idioms which are considered to be an extremely important integral of learning a language through learning the culture of a nation. Since not much research has been done about translation as teaching methodology or as an aid tool for correct teaching and learning English vs. Albanian idioms, this paper aims to analyze how helpful is translation and equivalence finding of idioms to enhance teaching and learning them. In other words, this presentation is the overview of the most frequently used translation strategies in idiom translation as an importance to manage teaching English idioms and to ease learning English idioms as well as representing some useful activities for teachers how to easy teach English idioms.

Since, the examination and classification of strategies to translate idioms are as useful and helpful as examination and classification of strategies to teach them, teachers/instructors before getting in front of students and fill in their head with idioms, should first learn enough about the functions of idioms, the source of idiom and the equivalence in the target language to get prepared to explain that before their students.

Thus for, this paper/presentation shall also give explanations on how to avoid incorrect teaching, through recommendations that more effort should be put on translation as cognitive tool.

Keywords: *idiom; translatability; equivalency; teaching strategy; learning strategy.*

The importance of idioms in language learning

When learning English as Second or Foreign Language, there is a great demand to understand the English lexicon in order to understand the meaning of words and their denotations. Such understanding requires comprehension learning of words by the student as well as comprehension teaching of connotative words by the teacher – teachers should be very

helpful in giving instructions to better understanding of figurative language.

Based on the 'A Reference Guide to American English Idioms – In the Loop' (1st ed.2010), idioms usually are a great fun and always a very special integral of any language; because of their pretty distinctive features, idioms lead to the differentiation of one language from another. Moreover, idioms reflect certain culture of a certain region and of certain tradition by depicting national character through national culture, tradition and belief (In the Loop, 1st ed.2010).

English idioms, as well as idioms of any other language, are a very important part of language and as it, they cannot be treated as a separate unit of the language and the freedom of choosing whether to use them or not within the vocabulary in use does not exist, since they do form a very essential part of general vocabulary of English language which is everyday growing more and more (Theory and Practice in Language Studies, Vol. 1, No. 7, pp. 879-883, July 2011).

Advancing the use of idioms by the students who do learn English as L2 helps to place idioms into perspective of SL and TL and best describes the growth of the vocabulary within both languages since idioms appear in every language.

“Since idiomatic expressions are so frequently encountered in both spoken and written discourse, they require special attention in language programs and should not be relegated to a position of secondary importance in the curriculum.” (Cooper, 1998). The way how confusing idioms can be because of their meaning and their structure, how the whole group of the words is put together, describes best the importance of translating idioms. The research activities assured great importance to find equivalence while showing idiom’s cultural origin to the students by teachers before using them within the text and before making students understand them within the context of the text in use, since the meaning of the words taken one by one did not correspond to the meaning they expressed together. Such challenge brought up the conclusion that students must understand what the idiom means in order to avoid word by word translation, since such translation leads to the loss of the exact meaning and brings difficulties finding idiom’s equivalence in TL.

Just because of idioms, learning English as L2 or as FL should not be complicated. Since idioms are vocabulary and culture bound, according to ‘Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language’ (4th edition, edited by M.C.Murcia, D.M.Brinton, M.A.Snow), teachers should help their students become good learners by helping them research for more

information toward English socio-cultural issues as well as historical origin of idioms in order to help them gain more vocabulary through idioms and using idioms easier. Exposing students to the target culture, on one hand helps teacher build the right strategy to teach idioms, and on the other hand helps students build their learning strategy according to their learning style by comprehensible inputs in language functions and skills, as explained in 'Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language' (4th edition, edited by M.C.Murcia, D.M.Brinton, M.A.Snow).

Consequently, general language acquisition shows that idioms and their frequent use by FLS makes them of great importance in learning EFL in general.

Translatability and Complexity of teaching and learning idioms

The reason why the majority of L2 students like idioms is that idioms are fun. Nevertheless, students do not need to learn all English idioms to speak English well. What they need to do is to improve their comprehension. To help and ease students' learning, teachers should first understand and define the meaning of idiom within the situation that the idiom presents, so students can get a view and make a sense of what they are talking, hearing or reading about. Because idioms are 'a group of words that means something different than the individual words it contains' (In the Loop, 1st ed. 2010), they become complex and their complexity makes them difficult for the students who do learn English as second language or as foreign language. However, it is the complexity what makes idioms interesting and fun to learn.

The purpose of translating idioms in the language classroom is to help learners develop their knowledge of English. As a cognitive process, though it is more appropriate for adult learners; it may be also used for primary and secondary school children, or at least for intermediate students. Thus for, application of several activities, such as matching meaning of idioms, multiple choice tests, memory card games, pocket reminders and idiom journal are to be of a great help in producing a strategy for teaching and learning idioms through finding translation equivalence of them.

Features of translating idioms

Based on the article 'The place of translation in Language Teaching' by R. Popović, for a long time in the process of teaching English, translation was

not allowed to be used as a pedagogical tool. Moreover, it was ridiculously seen as a negative impact to students' achievement.

Nowadays, it seems that such an attitude toward translation in language classroom has pretty much changed. This may be a result of the real teaching life facts and their effective results. Since translation requires discussion it may be a very useful tool for teaching: those who discuss it in their studies argue that translation is a legitimate pedagogical tool especially in an EFL environment and claim that it deserves to be rehabilitated (Widdowson 1978, p.18, Harmer 1991, p.62, Ellis 1992, p.46, Bowen, Marks 1994, p.93; Ur 1996, p.40). Yet, there are many challenges to be faced while using translation as a teaching tool. On one hand there is too much literature with relevant information on translation but it only deals either with translation theories or translators' training. On the other hand, just a few literatures serve any guidance how to use translation as an aid tool to teaching and learning. Translation as an aid to learning is likely to be favored by analytically oriented learners, especially when dealing with idioms.

Translating idioms from FL into NL seems to be more natural and easy, while rendering the NL idiom meaning into FL idiom requires more effort and demand. Based on the guidance given by 'A Reference Guide to American English Idioms – In the Loop' (1st ed.2010), senior teachers usually advise to leave translation of NL idioms into FL for a more advanced stage although there are a number of literal idioms which are very simple to be translated from L1 – L2 and can be also carried out at very initial learning stages, for example 'in any case'.

What can be further paraphrased from the 'A Reference Guide to American English Idioms – In the Loop' (1st ed.2010), translating idioms for teaching is pretty difficult because what needs to be translated is their meaning and not the words. Word by word translation is not preferable because of ambiguity that idioms possess.

Translation complexity of idioms as a pre-teaching preparation

Translation as a pre-teaching preparation comes along with obstacles that teachers may encounter while they get prepared to explain them before their students. Such obstacles may be grammatical, stylistic and lexical problems. To overcome these obstacles, teachers attempt to equivalence the meaning that reaches the TL text as close as possible to the SL text concerning its structure, meaning and style.

According to the 'Theory and Practice in Language Studies', (Vol. 1, No. 7, pp. 879-883, July 2011), idioms' translation from one language to another, obliges the translators to have a large knowledge about the idioms background culture so that it can be correctly interpreted and translated, which is considered as a hard task. Implication of the idioms' structure and meaning is very specific and an important language process for L2 students/learners. Thus for, the idioms' complexity obliges teachers as well to be well informed toward cultural background of idioms to interpret and translate them before teaching or presenting them before their students.

Since the way how idioms can be used and how they work requires information, translation of them by bringing up the idiom's meaning and origin makes teaching easier and more understandable, according to the 'A Reference Guide to American English Idioms – In the Loop' (1st ed.2010; Office of English Language Programs, US Department of State, English programs.state.gov).

The common problems that idiomatic expressions pose in translation relate to two important areas:

- The ability to recognize and interpret idioms correctly.
- The difficulties involved in rendering the various aspects of meaning that an idiom conveys into the TL.

These two difficulties are much more present in the case of idioms than they are in the case of fixed expressions (Baker 1992, p.65)

According to Baker (1992, p.68-70), the problem in translating an idiom is not about on which class an idiom is located on the scale of idiomaticity but the complexity in finding its equivalence. This means that an idiom in one language may express a given meaning by means of a single word in another language; however, it may express its meaning by the means of a transparent fixed expression. Still another one may express it by means of an idiom and so on.

Difficulties arising from the source language and source culture

On research basis, the most common translation technique found to be used is literal translation or so called word for word translation what usually leads students to an extreme confusion when they are about to learn idioms. This happens just because not all idioms in one language have their equivalence into another language. Since idioms are culturally specific, another factor of great impact is culture, thus for, a great attention should be paid more on the idioms' pragmatic meaning than in their literal meaning.

The following displaysmistakes done through classroom translation activity and can better illustrate the confusion that word for word translation may create when trying to teach or translate idioms:

- Engl. Original: He enjoys showing young professionals the ropes.
- Alb.trans: Atijipëlqent'juatregojprofesionistëvetërinjëlitaret – meaning in Eng. show someone the ropes = to explain and show by example how something is done properly – Equivalence in Alb. Atijipëlqent'iqesënërrugëprofesionistët e rinjë.

Many other translation versions were noticed in translating this idiom, such as drejttojë, sqarojë, hapërrugën, tregojërrugën. However, there was no attempt to find equivalence to the idiom in use. The idiom qesënërrugë/udhë in Albanian means exactly the same as the meaning of the idiom showing the ropes in English - to explain and show by example how something is done properly. Thus, in this case we used an idiom of similar meaning but of dissimilar form where the meaning of the target idiom is the same as that of the original idiom but the lexical items are different.

- His career has certainly not always been smooth sailing. – Alb.trans. Karriera e tijsigurishtnukkaqenëlundrimilehtë. – meaning in Eng. smooth sailing = an easy life with no problems; - Equivalence in Alb: Sigurisht se karriera e tijnukcashkuarçdo here vaj/ nukkaqenëçdo here punë e lehtë.

Smooth sailing was also translated as 'rëmim i lehtë' and such translation meets the correct meaning for the Albanians who live near the sea, since they use sea for their living, thus it is their living and working culture. On one hand, while we deal with the culture, we can use an idiom of similar meaning and similar form, as it is rrëmim i lehtë vs smooth sailing, while on the other hand we may use the opportunity of using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form to find the equivalence of this idiom, as it is shkuarvaj/punë e lehtë vs smooth sailing.

- Don't believe that success is ever manna from heaven. –Alb.tran. Mos besoni se suksemi është nga qielli. - meaning in Eng. manna from heaven = surprise riches; - Equivalence in Alb.-Kurrë mos mendoni se suksemi është dhuratë nga qielli.

According to the focus groups' discussions toward the most correct translation of the idioms in use, translation of the above mentioned idiom – 'manna from heaven' was considered to be translated through one-per-one strategy, where an idiom of similar meaning and form was used to find the equivalence to idiom in use. Using this strategy, the teacher to be acting as a translator must try to find an idiom in the target language as equivalent

to the source language, both in terms of meaning as well as lexical items. This strategy was hardly achieved because languages differ radically in the way they identify a single concept. However, it is regarded as the ideal strategy for translating idioms.

- Everyone he had met had a similar rags to riches story. Alb.trans. Secilin që kishte takuar kishte tregim të ngjajshëm shtroje e pasurie (prej zibidis tek pasaniku). – meaning in Eng. from rags to riches = from poor to rich; Equivalence in Alb. – Secili që kishte takuar i pati treguar përvojë të ngjajshme nga brrakat në kroje.

The culture interference yet represents a deep challenge where ‘rags to riches’ are replaced with ‘ravines and rivers’; ngabbrakatnëkroje vs rags to riches. Since no close match between the language items existed or no equivalence could be found by the teacher in action, the omitting strategy was used to completely omit the idiom from the target text. When the idiom was very difficult even for the translator to be naturalized, teacher tried to eliminate the whole or part of the idiom. Since the teacher translated to ease the process of teaching and learning idioms, it was obvious that she had to undergo the same strategy.

- It's absolutely essential to never spread yourself too thin. Alb.trans. Ështëabsolutishthelbësoreqëkurrëmos ta hapëshvehtenshumëholl. – meaning in Eng. spread oneself too thin = to do too many things; Equivalence in Alb. – Ështëtejet e rëndësishme që asnjëherë të mos hapësh shumë me punë / asnjëherë të mos fillosh 100 punë për njëherë.

In the example above, in order to represent the same meaning, we made use of different lexical items, so we used an idiom of the same meaning but of a different form to make an equivalent match between the idioms in SL to the idiom in TL.

- If you have too many irons in the fire, you'll certainly miss out on real opportunity. Alb.trans. Nësekevënëshumëhekurnëzjarr, sigurisht se do ta humbëshrastin e vërtetë. – meaning in Eng. have too many irons in the fire = to do too many things; Equivalence in Alb. – Nëseke nisur100 punëpërnjëherësh, sigurisht se kepër ta humburmundësinë e vërtetë.

Omitting was used as translation strategy to find equivalence of this idiom in use.

- I've seen people as busy as a bee who never really seem to do anything. Alb.trans. Kam parenjerëzqëpunojnësihletatëcilëtëkurrënukduket se pobëjnëndonjëgjë. – meaning in Eng. as busy as a bee = very busy (also busy as a beaver); Equivalence in Alb. Kam pare njerëzqënukdijnë se ku e kanëkokënngapuna e qënëtvërtetënukbëjnëasgjë.

Since no equivalents existed, it was not a wise act to omit the whole idiom but to present more clarifications on it. Of course by using paraphrasing as a translation strategy we faced the danger of losing the intended effect that the source language wanted to have on the audience. We could also lose the cultural significance. The target students were not able to get more familiar with the culture of the source language.

- If you put on your thinking cap, you'll realize that it's impossible to really concentrate if you have to worry about fifty different things. Alb.trans. Nëseti e vëkapelenpërtëmënduar, e kupton se kjo është e pamundur për tu koncentruar nëse ke për tu brengosur rreth pesëdhjetë gjërave të ndryshme. -meaning in Eng. put on one's thinking cap = to concentrate; Equivalence in Alb. Venjagishtinkokesdhe do ta kuptosh se është fare e pamundurqëtëkoncentroheshrrethpesëdhjetë (ose 500) punëvetëndryshmepërnjëherë.

Attempting to find the right match of the idiom from TL into the SL, an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form was used, while through the discussion the need for compensation as a matter of culture was revealed since Kosovo Albanians give stress to the importance by multiplying the quantity hundred times. Similar sample is the one translated above: have to worry about fifty things – tëmerresh me pesëqindpunë.

- It's important to know which side your bread is buttered on and make sure to give that activity your full attention. Alb.tran. Është me rëndësi të dihet se në cilën anë është buka jote e lyer dhe të sigurohesh të ja japësh atij aktiviteti vëmendjen tënde të plotë –meaning in Eng. know which side one's bread is buttered on = to understand what is most important for oneself. Equivalence in Alb. Duhettëdihettëndahetshapingasheqeridhetëdrejtohetpërkushtiminëpunën e duhur.

The discussion of this equivalence finding led to the use of two strategies since there was a need for structural intervention in order to not lose the meaning as well as cultural specifics. Omitting and paraphrasing were used in order to come up with the right equivalence.

- In other words, you need to ride the gravy train. Alb.trans. Me fjalët tjera, tiduhet ta ngasështrenin me lëngmishi. (Here was faced the best opportunity to understand the importance of teacher in equivalence finding vs. dictionary) –meaning in Eng. ride the gravy train = to make money by doing something that is already proven to be successful. Equivalence in Alb. Me fjalë të tjera, bjeri rrugës së rrahur.

Omitting was the best strategy to translate this idiom in order of having effective teaching

- Don't start looking for new challenges if everything is working out for the best! Alb.trans. Mos kërko ballafaqime të reja nëse çdo gjë është duke funksionuar për të mire! – meaning in Eng. work out for the best = to end with the best possible result. Equivalence in Alb. Mosinxjerrvehtespunështesënësegjithçkaështë duke ecurmësëmiri!

In order of having effective teaching, the best strategy to be used in translation of this idiom was paraphrasing since it brought the best equivalency between both languages in use.

- have the presence of mind to not only take advantage of an opportunity, but also to keep your eye on the ball. Alb.trans. ta kenimendjen present e jovetëmpërt'immarrëavantazhet e njërast, porgjithashtut'imbanisytëtektopi. – meaning in Eng. keep one's eye on the ball = to concentrate and continue doing well. Equivalence in Alb. Duhet ta kenimendjenjovetëmçetëpërfitoningarasti, poredhetëmosjuikënasgjë / t'ibënisytëkatra.

Not finding a proper equivalent, giving a literal translation was not easy task to do, because the more literal an idiom was translated, the more confusion it brought to the students. Thus paraphrasing was used as strategy of translation in order of reaching effective teaching and learning strategy.

- Finally, make sure to never show your hand to your opponents. Alb.trans. Së fundi, sigurohu që kurrë të mos i'a tregosh dorën kundërshtarit tënd. – meaning in Eng. show one's hand = to show others what advantages you have in a situation. Equivalence in Alb. Fare në fund, sigurohuni që të mos hapeni kurrë me kundërshtarin tuaj.

Since there was a need for structural intervention in order of not losing the meaning as well as cultural specifics, omitting and paraphrasing were used as translation strategies to come up with the right equivalence for the idiom in use and ease the teaching/learning process.

Conclusion

Offering a strategy to teach and learn idioms through translation and research is considered as one of the best solutions to ease the teaching and learning process. Using translation strategy as a tool to ease teaching and learning strategy helps to find the best equivalence from SL to TL. Translating idioms before teaching them, as teaching and learning activity, comes under direct strategies where memory, analyzing and word coining is involved.

According to Baker (1992:74), translation strategy is “the most common way in translating idioms when a match cannot be found in the language or it seems inappropriate to use idiomatic language in TL because of differences in stylistic preferences of the source and target language”, will be of a great help to the teachers of English language to teach idioms to different levels and ages.

The strategy avoids bad translation by trying to get an idiom from SL to an idiom in TL. This way we also avoid bad teaching, or better say incorrect teaching, what brings to a conclusion that more effort should be put on translation as cognitive teaching tool.

Teachers should be pretty creative and use art, images, slides to convey the meaning beyond the individual words that make up an idiom. This also helps students understand and learn the culture because teachers have the opportunity to explain that as the culture changes some idioms may fall out of the language and other idioms may replace them. Students get their thoughts clarified that idioms can be complementary as well as insulting, can express emotions such as depression, love and hate, and are also shown that it is the idioms complexity what makes them as difficult as interesting to be learned and taught.

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