

2020

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Recommended Citation

Rodriquez, Timothy (2020) "The Benefits of Implementing Cognitively-Demanding and Context-Embedded Language Translation in the EL Classroom," *ECTESOL Review*. Vol. 3: No. 1, Article 2.
Available at: https://jagworks.southalabama.edu/ectesol_review/vol3/iss1/2

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The Benefits of Implementing Cognitively-Demanding and Context-Embedded Language Translation in the EL Classroom

Timothy A. Rodriguez

Abstract

The role of the first language in English Learner (EL) programs has been a historically controversial one. In addition, how the first language should be used is not without controversy. This article examines the role of translation in the EL classroom and how teachers should employ it. One approach, concurrent translation, may be considered to be cognitively-undemanding and context-reduced. The author argues that purposeful translation should be cognitively-demanding and context-embedded.

Key Words: translation, context-embedded, cognitively-demanding, instructional level

The issue is which role, if any, students' first language should play in the various second-language programs throughout the United States. Dual-Language programs employ the first language as a resource and even has a major goal of maintaining it. Stakeholders in some immersion programs acknowledge that English Learners (ELs) are not exactly like the traditional English-speaking and make accommodations to make language comprehensible and learning achievable. Many of these same stakeholders may use the first language as a springboard to the second language, but maintenance of the first language is not a goal. At any rate, Gottlieb (2016) stated that when students have more than one language in common, trans-linguistic transfer will occur. If that is assessment is accurate, and I would argue it is, it is critical to examine the role that translation should play in the EL classroom.

Krashen (1987) stated that effective learning was dependent on comprehensible input that was slightly above the student's present level. Krashen also stated that comprehensible output from the student was also crucial to the student's development. Cummins (1984) discussed a quadrant for designing learning activities. Cummins stated that activities are either cognitively-undemanding and context-embedded, cognitively-demanding and context-embedded, cognitively-undemanding and context-reduced, or cognitively-demanding and context-reduced. If instruction is too easy, that is to say, that it is at a student's independent level, learning is unlikely to occur. If instruction is challenging but not supported by the teacher, it is too difficult, which would be at the student's frustration level. An example of a cognitively-undemanding and context-embedded activity would be a face-to-face conversation, with speakers using gestures and concrete references. An example of a cognitively-demanding and context-embedded activity would a hands-on lesson or a lesson with visuals. An example of a cognitively-undemanding and context-reduced activity would be a telephone conversation. Finally, an example of a cognitively-demanding and context-reduced activity would be a lecture with few illustrations.

Some teachers have high expectations, which is fine. Without scaffolding, however, they only create a cognitively-undemanding and context-reduced setting. What they should provide is a cognitively-demanding and context-embedded setting. Providing comprehensible input means working within each student's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). The learning environment is cognitively-demanding and context-embedded. In an attempt to provide a context-

embedded learning environment, some teachers provide concurrent translation. Freeman and Freeman (2011) argued that this approach is ineffective because students pay attention only to language they understand; in other words, the first language.

Rodriguez (1995) discussed a teacher who used concurrent translation with one student who was still an emergent learner despite being in a second-language program for three years. The teacher's explanation was that she wanted to provide the same education for the student for whom she employed concurrent translation as the rest of the class. However, equal does not always mean equitable. By using concurrent translation with the student, instruction for him was cognitively-undemanding and context-reduced. Instruction was at his independent level, and his progress in English was limited. The principal in the study discussed the role that reading in English should play. He stated that the role of English should be dominant from the onset. The students should understand the English text from the beginning of the students' time in the EL program, whether the students can read English or if a teacher or aide reads the text in English and translates it into Spanish. In other words, a transmission view of instructions should occur. Instruction is, in other words, cognitively-demanding and context-reduced. There is an attempt to make instruction context-embedded through the use of concurrent translation of text. Students in this setting are not allowed to negotiate meaning, and they are not learning the target language in this particular lesson, which may be repeated throughout the school year.

The first language may be used as a resource. In order to promote a cognitively-demanding and context-embedded environment, meaning needs to be negotiated, and teachers need to promote that skill. For example, Rodriguez (2001) described how to employ cognates between Spanish and English to teach vocabulary, decoding, and spelling. In this approach, the teacher asks for students to find cognates in texts rather than pointing them out to students. Students are also asked to employ context clues to determine the meaning of words that are not cognates. This approach reflects a cognitively-demanding and context-embedded approach. Conversely, when teachers employ concurrent translation, they are transmitting knowledge, which is a teacher-centered approach.

Cummins (1996) stated that a speaker who has a high level of literacy is more likely to be literate in the second language. The skills developed in the first language allows students to make a connection between the first language and the target language. Cummins (1984) also postulated that language has a Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP). He stated that cognitively-demanding tasks such as literacy are common across languages. CUP is the basis of the linguistic interdependence theory. Cummins argued that language skills such as Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) transfer across languages (the former is social language, and the latter is academic language). This is illustrated by the fact that a person can read about a topic in one language and discuss it in another. We are not restricted to reading and discussing what we read in the same language. Funds of knowledge and language skills can transfer across languages. While a person may be more proficient in one language than another, that doesn't have to be the case.

Translation may be used in a manner that is cognitively-demanding and context-embedded. For example, Freeman and Freeman (2011) advocated for the preview-view-review method. This method promotes the negotiation of meaning between the reader and texts. The first step is to read text in the first language, then in the second language, and again in the first language. Of course, you would want to discuss the text with the students after each reading. I would even place them in small discussion groups and then have a whole-class discussion after the group members have discussed the text. Besides the content, students can discuss vocabulary and perhaps grammar.

This method takes advantage of what students already know and links prior knowledge to new content.

Teachers also need to differentiate their language and level of support according to each student's English level proficiency. Teachers may scaffold language to facilitate comprehensible input and the students' comprehensible output (Gottlieb, 2016). For beginning language learners, teachers may use pictures or objects to assess comprehension. For example, teachers may hold two objects and ask the student to identify the object they name by pointing at the correct object. Teachers may also give a student two options about an object and ask an "either/or" or a "yes/no" question. Next, teachers may expand and extend the student's statements. For example, teachers may ask a student if the pencil was red or blue. When the student gave a one-word answer, teachers may expand his utterance by saying, "The pencil is blue." Then, teachers may extend the language by saying, "Blue is a pretty color." Teachers can provide sentence starters to support ELs' efforts to answer questions. Asking "where," "when," and "who" questions are also recommended. Students' answers may vary from one-word responses for beginning ELs to simple sentences to developing ELs. "How" and "why" questions should be employed for expanding and bridging ELs because those types of questions require longer responses. Teachers may repeat each answer in Spanish and then in English. A variation of this would be to have the student answer questions in Spanish and then English. Finally, the teacher may ask "How" and "Why" questions to beginning ELs and have the students respond in Spanish. The teacher may repeat the answer in Spanish and then in English. It is recommended that the teacher writes the answers for the students to see. If there are any cognates, the teacher may ask the student to identify them.

The role of translation in the EL classroom should promote thinking and language competence. Therefore, it should be cognitively-demanding and context-embedded. Concurrent translation that does not promote the learning of the target language should be ignored. Purposeful translation and using the first language through the use of cognates and the preview-view-review method are highly recommended because they promote thinking through language and thinking about language. Using the first language in a way that is student-centered and reflects each student's abilities and needs will promote language learning.

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