

## Translation as a Tool to Teach English to Thai Learners

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### Abstract

This article aims to describe the use of translation as a tool to teach English to Thai learners, to make learners aware of lexical and grammatical differences between Thai and English, to teach new words through translation and to enable them to translate English text into Thai satisfactorily. The translation method is nowadays not much appreciated as it is viewed that the aim in learning English is a communicative ability. However, translation still has a very important role to play as far as learning English is concerned. The point is that the teacher of translation has to be tactful in planning and selecting what to teach. The teacher must be able to combine translation with other disciplines such as reading, applied linguistics, and semantics. It is recommended that in using translation as a teaching tool, more focus should be on a grammatical structure and vocabulary learning as these two categories are the fundamentals that could serve as a stepping stone to a more advanced level. However, it is to bear in mind that a grammatical explanation should be done only if necessary. A good way to encourage learners to improve their learning potential is through a short, but frequent exercise.

**Keywords:** translation, tool, Thai learners, teaching approach

## Introduction

To get the idea what translation is, it is important to first understand a basic definition of translation. Although translation has been variously defined by different scholars, in the present article only two definitions are selected. The first definition is given by Bell: “Translation is the expression in another language or target language of what has been expressed in another, source language, preserving semantic and stylistic equivalences.” (1993, p. 5). The second definition of translation is derived from the book, *Fundamentals of Translation* by Sonia Colina. The definition given therein is: “Translation refers to the process of, or the product resulting from, transferring or mediating written texts of different lengths from one human language to another” (2015, p.3). In addition, more details are added on the concept of translation: written text, transfer, from one natural language to another. Colina explains that translation deals with the transfer of written text, When the text or the medium is oral, however, the term is interpreting or interpretation.

Translation has been used for thousands of years from the ancient times to the present day. Nowadays it is more or less being superseded by machine. As a teacher of English for years, I have observed that Thai learners do not take translation seriously. Possibly they think that it is not important any more. They have got the impression that they can rely on their gadgets like cell phones to do the work instead, which is fast although not totally correct.

As regards using translation as a teaching tool in teaching English to Thai learners, it is contentious whether or not translation should be used at all in teaching English to foreign learners. It can be argued that translation may not be much useful if it is rigidly used to teach learners how to memorize a sentence or a word and then mechanically translate it in another language. However, if translation is used in

combination with other disciplines like discourse analysis, communicative learning, and other teaching methods, translation can be a helpful hand to learners (Mallikamat, 2010, p.14).

Based on my teaching experiences, I have found that one of the major obstacles that considerably impede the learning progress among Thai learners is the influence from their mother tongue (Thai). The influence in question can be felt not only in speaking, and writing, but also in translating. The mother tongue's influence is conspicuous particularly when Thai learners are required to translate Thai into English. In most cases, Thais who have to translate Thai into English often translate it based on their language structure. Hence, the result is the translation is unintelligible to readers/ receivers.

Regarding the hurdles posed by the mother tongue, (Girard, 1980, p.2) had this to say:

*When teachers of a foreign language start teaching, they find themselves fighting against the linguistic habits of the mother tongue which have by now been firmly entrenched. The biggest problem will therefore be how to break down habits of hearing and producing speech, even to alter fixed ways of thought and to establish new systems in their place.*

There are some teachers who avoid using a mother tongue in the classroom. However, this may be useful to some extent. One has to realize that Thai learners of English learn English mostly in the classroom or a formal situation. Apart from that they all the times use their own mother tongue. It does not matter how much effort the teacher uses to communicate in English in the class, an influence as exerted by a

mother tongue remains powerful. With this in mind, it is no use trying to get rid of a mother tongue influence. Rather, an effort should be made to best utilize it instead. Translation should be carefully combined with other methods in a teaching - learning process in a wider scope, not just in memorizing the meaning of a word or a sentence. That does not only help learners to perform better, but also makes them aware of “similarity in difference” and “difference in similarity” (Mallikamat, 2010, p.16).

### **Does translation matter?**

There is a long running debate over which method is the best to teach English to foreign learners. On one side of the scale is what is known as ‘a translation method’. It is the method which allows the teacher to explain the meaning or communicate in his mother tongue.

In this traditional language teaching, the way into the new language was through the student’s first language. Complicated rules were mastered and this mastery then tested by means of translation. Success was measured in terms of the accurate use of grammar and vocabulary rather than effective communication (Cook, 2003, p. 32).

On the other side is a direct method in which the students’ own languages were banished and everything was to be done through language under instruction. Translation and first - language explanation were banned and the new method enforced. Besides, there is a natural approach which holds that learning would take place without explanation or grading, and without correction of errors, but by exposure to ‘meaningful input’(Cook, 2003, p. 34). The direct method means teaching ‘directly’ in the foreign language, without the intermediary of the mother

tongue, and demanding the active participation of learners who were required to use the new language from the start (Girard, 1980, p. 4).

### **Significance of translation**

The problems facing Thai learners are that they do not learn English as a foreign language; hence they do not acquire it naturally, rather they learn it consciously in a formal setting and in a set time scale.

Many people have a wrong impression that translation is not concerned with the grammatical structure and the vocabulary. It is to be argued that without a proper understanding of grammar and sufficient vocabulary, learners will find it impractical and impossible to translate from one language into another. Suwanee Pinmanee (2012, p. 180) held that a grammatical structure is the principle in organizing language in a meaningful way. When an organized structure changes, meanings also change.

The present article describes translation in relation to two main categories: grammatical parts and lexical parts. The reasons for selecting these two aspects are that grammatical parts very essential to learning a foreign language like English. They can be likened to the bones of a body as far as a foreign language learning-teaching process is concerned. Without these, reading, writing and even translating are impossible. However, grammatical parts can be voluminous, thus it is impossible to describe all in one paper. Thus, I have chosen some parts to illustrate the points I want to make. Vocabulary is also indispensable to learning any given foreign language. Without vocabulary, nothing can be expected from both learners and a teaching process. In brief, for teaching and learning translation to be effective, learners are to be equipped with these parts, and teachers have to pay more attention

to these as well. Mention is to be made that Thai learners in question are at beginner and intermediate levels. Hence, the aspects to be described are deemed suitable for them.

The first category covers *noun phrases, verbs, sentences, question words*. The second covers *a learning of a vocabulary and collocational meaning*.

It is to be understood that these two aspects are closely intertwined. One cannot be removed without affecting the other.

As is mentioned above, the grammatical structure is highly essential to translating. It is the essential element learners have to grasp in order to read and then translate. Ariyapitipan (2007, p. 55) had a similar view. She viewed that the problem commonly found is that learners lack fundamental knowledge of grammar, which proves difficult to solve. A majority of learners focus their attention more on the meaning of a word. She further added that although learners might have known all meanings of any individual words, without knowledge of the grammatical structure, they were still unable to grasp relevant meaning of the text, or possibly learners may misinterpreted the meaning of the words. Therefore, it can be said that good knowledge of the structure can greatly help learners to correctly grasp the meaning.

The purpose in taking up these two aspects is to describe what points should be taught to learners in the first place. Another important point is that understanding the grammatical parts in either English or Thai may be insufficient. Thus, learners have to know the similarity and the difference in both languages. To deal with the differences in two languages, it is necessary to describe the word order to enable learners to get an idea as regards the translation process. Here there is a vital point I would like to make. This article describes only the basic methods of translation based on some grammatical aspects, and the main target is Thai learners

who are at beginner and intermediate levels. I will not go into other domains like semantic, syntactic and pragmatic aspects as these are too advanced for the target learners. Practically speaking, some basic aspects may be more useful than highly theoretical ones.

## Phrases

Phrases in English can be divided into different types such as a noun phrase, a verb phrase, a prepositional phrase, an adjectival phrase. In this article I deal only with the noun phrase. This is because this phrase is used with the high frequency as compared to other types.

In this aspect, teachers are to explain the structure of a noun phrase in Thai and English, and then show how they are different and similar. At this point, they have to show that English can have pre-modifiers and post-modifiers whereas Thai has only the post-modifier, e.g. (Mallikamat, 2021, p. 169).

*He bought two expensive cars which are made in Japan.*

A noun phrase in Thai from the above sentence is: *he bought cars expensive two which are made in Japan.*

The reason why teachers have to give attention to this point is that a noun phrase with long pre-modifiers can particularly pose a problem to Thai learners. A teacher is to bear this in mind and give more care when dealing with this structure. Learners are to be guided to translate the head noun first, then move on to the pre-modifiers and post-modifiers respectively.

The difficulty often occurs when a head noun had many modifying words. That is, the more modifying words a noun phrase in English has, the more difficult it becomes for Thai learners of English. It is often found that many Thai learners

translate English using their own language structure. Judging from my teaching experience, many of Thai learners of the translation course often translate a long noun phrase. For example:

*Obelisk is the tall, pointed stone column with four sides.*

With the long noun phrase as in the sentence, Thai learners often move in a right-branching order as in Thai from *Tall*, then to *Pointed*, and to *Stone, column* respectively. It is the teacher's task to point out the difference of noun phrases of the two languages. As for noun phrases in English, learners have to start with the head first, then move to its modifiers.

Things become especially problematic when they have to translate the sentence like:

*China conducted a test of ground-based mid-range missile interception technology within its territory.*

As was said above, the longer the modifiers are, the more difficult the noun phrase is.

## Verb

A verb can be a useful point in teaching translation. Students are to be taught that a verb in English is changed according to time, number, and aspects. In contrast, a verb in Thai remains the same regardless of these elements. A teacher has to point this out and demonstrate the difference in a sentence or paragraph. Example:

*He goes to buy a flower.*

*Boys sit.*

*She went yesterday.*

The teacher has to point out the difference as to why the first sentence has –s added to a verb, while the second has no –s, and explain why the third one has its



verb in the past form (went). An English sentence changes according to the time of action, while it is not the case in Thai. In other words, although the word order in two languages are the same, a subject and a verb in English vary according to the time, the number and the completion of action, while those in Thai do not.

Prasitratthasin, et al. (1999, p. 74) made a point, saying that Thai and English were different in a time concept in that every English sentence had to show whether the action happened in the present, past or future. In contrast, Thai did not consider it important when the action occurred. It did not specify the time sequence. Readers could easily interpret the incidents from the context.

## Sentence

The sentence structure in English can be up to hundreds. Hence, it is impossible for the teachers to teach all. What the teacher should do is selecting the common sentence pattern for a teaching purpose. Furthermore, the selected sentences should consist of basic elements only, that is, **Subject, Verb, Object, Complement**. The teacher should realize and start from simple sentences to difficult ones. While teaching, if possible, the teacher should ask learners to analyze the elements in question.

It is true that Thai and English may have a similar structure, which can prove beneficial to both learners and teachers alike. Nonetheless, there are more differences between the two languages. The most apparent similarity of the sentence structure is the word order: *subject verb object*. For example:

English	<i>He buys a book.</i>	S	V	O
Thai	<i>/khao sue nangsue/</i>	S	V	O

In the examples presented the structures of Thai and English are similar. In the example, the structure is **subject verb and object**. When similarities are present in two languages, things may become easier. However, the teacher of translation is advised to pay more attention when the differences occur, especially when some features present in the original language are absent in the target language.

In teaching how to translate the verbs like *give, show, bring, buy*, the teacher is to show learners how to translate the sentences below. In the first sentence, learners can move to a right hand as in Thai. However, in the second, they have to translate a direct object (flowers) first and then followed by an indirect object (me). Learners should be told that this structure is not used in Thai.

*They buy flowers for me.* S V O prep IO

*They buy me flowers.* S V IO DO

In the first sentence, the structures in Thai and English are similar. In the second sentence, however, they are different. In Thai language, the indirect object (me) does not precede the direct object (flowers). Learners of translation are to be made aware of this type of the differences.

### Question Words

This is a useful point the teacher of translation can utilize to teach translation. He or she should point out the different positions of question words in English and Thai, particularly in the question patterns.

The word order in Thai and English is different when the sentence has the question words, who, why, when, where, etc. For example:

*When have you finished your work?*

*Why do they arrive late?*

*Where are my books?*

The difference in a word order is that the question words in English are placed at the beginning of a sentence, while those in Thai are placed at the end of a sentence. The examples shown here are short and therefore relatively simple. However, if the sentence having any of the question words is longer and more complicated, things become more difficult.

The word order in Thai and English is similar in some points and different in others when it comes to the auxiliary verbs. Consider the examples:

*Some animals can be dangerous.*

*They could stay with me tonight.*

In an affirmative sentence as shown above, the word order in both Thai and English is the same. However, the difference occurs if the sentence is in a form of a question. For example:

*Could you turn on the light?*

*May I borrow your book?*

*Can you pass me the salt?*

It is to be observed that in English the auxiliaries are placed before the subject, while in Thai they come after the subject with the particles / mai/, /ruemai/, /daimai/ being added at the end of each sentence (Higbie & Tinsan, 2008, p. 60). A common pattern in Thai is to ask the question first, then state what you are referring to:

English      Is Thai food good?

Thai            (Is it good –Thai food) or  
 (Thai food- is it good?)

## Vocabulary

One problem learners of a foreign language often face is one English word can have multiple meanings. The learners who come across such words may find themselves in a great dilemma as to which meaning they are supposed to use in the phrase or sentence they are about to translate. If they choose the wrong or inappropriate meaning, the translation they made may sound unnatural and incomprehensible. The example of the words with multiple meanings given below is 'plant' (Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2009, p. 1081).

The word 'plant' can mean:

- 1) (noun) A living thing that grows in earth, in water, or on other plants, usually has a stem, leaves, roots and flowers:

*This plant grows quickly.*

- 2) (noun) A factory in which a product is made or power is produced:

*Two car production plants were closed by the strike.*

- 3) (verb) to put a plant into the ground or into a container of soil so that it will grow:

*The farmers plant rubber trees.*

- 4) (verb) to put something or someone in a position secretly:

*She insisted that the drugs had been planted on her without her knowledge.*

It is true that one word can have multiple meanings. The context clues, however, at times can be of immense help to make things easy for learners to select an accurate meaning. The difficulty as described above can be appropriately dealt with when learners are given additional exercises on the words with the multiple

meanings so that they develop more skills and can translate such words more effectively later on.

In a language learning process, if the structure of language is comparable to a body, then vocabulary is to the soul. Both elements are indispensable parts to learning English. In order to learn foreign languages such as English, a learner is required to know sufficient vocabulary to be able to communicate in English successfully. Regrettably, this area of learning is often underappreciated. As a result, Thai learners cannot do well as they do not have working words particularly in the discipline of reading and translating. Translation is a good means which requires learners to work out on the meaning of vocabulary.

Vocabulary is not only crucial to translating a foreign language, it is also to reading it. Thais who learn English as a foreign language should realize that reading and translating English are closely related. In other words, when they read a sentence or a passage in English, Thai learners unknowingly translate the sentence in their mind. Then the translation process has already occurred. However, the translation in question is not produced in a writing form as is commonly seen. The type of the mental translation happens because Thais learn English as a foreign language. In most cases, they learn English in the classroom or formal situation. Once they are outside the class, their opportunity to use English in their daily life is minimum. Thus, it does not come as a surprise to find that in spite of their having learned English for many years, they have hardly been successful or fluent in the language.

In teaching vocabulary in translation, thus, teachers also have to teach the part of speech, and the correct meaning based on context, so that learners are able to choose the right meaning. As learners cannot memorize words for very long, teaching a translation of a word or sentence in a context not only makes a learning

process more interesting, but it also helps learners to retain their memory of the words for much longer.

A short example of learning vocabulary in context given below helps make the point clear. Learners should be encouraged to learn not an isolated word or sentence, but they should be taught to learn the word as a family.

*The **situation** in our cities with regard to **traffic** is going from bad to worse. Congestion is a daily feature of urban life. The **problem** is now beginning to **affect** our national economies. Unless a new **approach** is found to control traffic, we will never find a **solution** to the **dilemma**.*

From the above passage, the key words are ‘*situation, traffic, problem, affect, approach, solution, dilemma*’. Although a learner cannot know the meanings of all the words in bold, he or she may know any of these words. Besides, it is not difficult for a learner to guess the overall meaning of the passage from the key words. In addition, there are words of secondary importance like ‘*bad to worse, urban life, control traffic*’. All these words can be useful clues to learners. Teaching vocabulary through a lexical field can make the translation task a lot easier for learners.

### **Collocation**

One area which is problematic in translation, but highly useful in teaching translation is collocation. Collocation is a habitual juxtaposition of a particular word with other words. It is a type of syntagmatic relationship between words. There are two kinds of collocation. 1) Grammatical collocation is the type where a verb, adjectives, etc. must be followed by a particular preposition, e.g. *account for, afraid of*. 2) Lexical collocation is a construction where particular nouns, adjectives, verbs

or adverbs form predictable connections with each other, e.g. *tell a story*, *miss a lesson* (Redman, 2008: p.30-31). Other common collocations are:

*tell a joke*, *make money*, *make friends*, *do homework*, *do business*, *a soft drink*, *a strong coffee*, *a strong accent*, *heavy traffic*, *highly unlikely*, *fully aware*, *terribly sorry*.

In teaching translation, it is advisable that the teacher should give more attention to collocational words. That is, they should teach words in a group or a phrase that normally come together, not teaching isolated words. Example:

*A large number of workers had been laid off when the factories where they were working had suffered great losses and had to close down.*

The teacher can teach learners by having them underline the collocational words in the sentence, and then translate those underline words. Teaching collocational words rather than individual words as shown can save time and help learners learn faster. If learners know the collocational words, their tasks in translating will prove easier and more natural.

Therefore, this method of teaching not only contributes to students' ability to translate the words correctly, it also makes their translation sound more natural. In addition, using collocation can help them learn more words faster and more efficiently.

It can be said that translation is an interesting approach to help learners get more words provided that there is an effort to make a translation approach more interesting. An advantage a translation method has over a direct method referred to earlier is that it saves time for both teachers and students. While teaching a teacher saves time by quickly translating any given word in a mother tongue. The teacher

who uses a direct method and is not allowed to use a mother tongue has to explain and give a definition of a word, which might consume more time in the process.

However, the teachers are to be fully aware that they must not prescribe a long exercise to their students. A long exercise is at times impractical. The point is that teachers should assign a short, but frequent exercise to their students. In other words, the exercise prescribed is to be practical and manageable.

It is widely accepted that a short, but regular exercise is more beneficial to learners (Mallikamat, 2010, p. 210) The reasons are a long exercise would require a lot of time and a lot of attention on the part of both students and teachers. The activity which requires longer time can easily make learners lose their concentration on and interest in what they are doing. As a result, the learners' performance may not be efficient as expected. As for the teachers, if they give a long exercise, they may require more time to evaluate the students' paper. Importantly, when there are many mistakes made by learners, the students may be unable to realize what points they are supposed to focus on.

On the other hand, a frequent, but short, practice can be more efficient, and make them aware of their mistakes. Thus, teachers have to be tactful and selective in using translation to teach English. With carefully chosen methods, translation can be interesting, not dry and boring as perceived by many.

## **Conclusion**

Translation is still a very important tool in learning and teaching English to Thai learners although there are some who are opposed to the translation approach. The crucial factor is that teachers have to wisely use it as a tool to explain some problematic issues to learners, for example, multiple meanings words, cultural



differences, and certain grammatical rules. Although the aim of using translation is to make learners aware of the differences at lexical and grammatical levels, teachers have to be cautious and realize that they must not explain all grammatical rules. Explaining all grammatical rules and giving all details is a time-consuming process, and it can be intolerably boring to learners. Rather they should select only the ones deemed beneficial and necessary to learners.

In addition to the points made, the teachers have to know how to integrate different aspects of language while teaching to maximize the benefits for learners. He or she has to realize that one theory or dimension is not sufficient. A blend of different theories proves to be most effective in the teaching process. In translation care is to be taken of as regards the decisions when to provide explanation and extra detail, and how far to depart from the original. To use translation as a tool in teaching English, teachers have to be aware of what they plan to teach in order to achieve the goals they have set.

Here, it is worth mentioning that both teachers and learners have to realize that translation cannot be conducted at a purely linguistic level, but must incorporate cultural and contextual factors. Only by wisely using translation will learners have a better opportunity to gain the most benefits in their learning of English. The next thing to be properly considered is that the texts for learners to translate should be suitable according to their ability and learning objectives. The teachers have to arrange the original texts from simple to more difficult levels. By properly selecting a proper text suitable for the learners, they are expected to be able translate a given text satisfactorily and successfully.

The method of selecting an appropriate text is suggested by Wimonchalao (2001). She explained that sentences or passages assigned for learners can help

teachers know their potential. With the tasks given, learners are required to translate only the sentences or passages specified by teachers. They cannot avoid by using other words or sentences to replace the words or sentences they are required to translate. It is a good way for them to learn English grammar from actual usages. Woranat also added that learners who were given complex sentences could not leave out or leave them untranslated. They were forced to face the problem and tried their best to solve it.

There is another advantage in using translation to teach a foreign language. Teachers can teach new words in English through a translation method. While teaching, teachers are advised to carefully guide them to keywords which are relevant to one another in a text. This is a critical point as learners are to be taught to see the connections of the keywords with other relevant ones. It is important to keep in mind that words or sentences are not to be translated in isolation; they should be taught in contexts in such a way that learners are more or less able to guess the meanings from the clues provided in the text. It is the way to teach the vocabulary in relation to a lexical field, which can be of great help to learners. The similar recommendation is made by Mallikamat (2010, p. 303): “Teaching a fixed word- by- word meaning does not correspond to the nature of language. One word may have a multiple meaning. One meaning can be used in a variety of contexts. Learners, thus, should be taught to carefully select the meaning based on the context. This method can help learners the meaning they want.”

To help learners acquire more words and more learning experience, a wide range of texts should be used. With various texts used, learners are more engaged and bound to get exposed to a variety of topics and different usages of English.

Teachers should give an exercise on translation with focus on particular grammatical rules in which their learners often make mistakes. The goal in focusing on the points which are often problematic to learners is to enhance their exposure to the point. The teachers have to be prudent. They should not give too much attention to one particular point at the cost of others as doing so can unbalance learners' learning potential. It is to be understood that translation cannot be conducted a purely linguistic level, but must incorporate cultural and contextual factors too. In every translation something must be lost. One cannot keep the sound and the word order and the exact nature of the phrase. One cannot always make the translation accurate, feasible and appropriate. Translation may be perfectly impossible but necessary in the world's affairs and in individual lives.

From the reasons described, one can confidently say that translation still plays a vital role in students' learning of English in the contexts such as in Thailand. It is still highly useful as long as the teacher of translation knows how to plan, choose an appropriate text and cleverly apply it in the learning and teaching process. Once this requirement has been wisely fulfilled, then the question, "Does translation matter?" can be positively answered, "Yes, a lot."

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