

Translation? Surely You Jest!

Many language teachers think that translation has gone the way of dinosaurs – or should. The writer hopes that by the end of this article, she'll have convinced you that translation, done properly, is a valuable and necessary activity.

When we speak, we are putting our thoughts – usually sentences – into words. Learning to do this well with pen and paper gives a speaker both practice and confidence for generating speech. Translation exercises give structure to this and provide an opportunity to practice current grammatical constructions and vocabulary as well as using material learned previously.

As described, this is definitely a culminating activity for a unit of study. Typically it is a full-period activity the day before a test (probably a shorter time for beginning classes), since the sentences will cover all the current material for which the students are responsible.

Before class:

Prepare slips of paper, tongue depressors, or Popsicle sticks with every student's name. Early in the year, students can make their own in a few minutes in class, or you can ask a volunteer to do them all for you. These are handy for all kinds of routines and activities.

Write a set of about eighteen English sentences to be translated – whatever fills a page. Make a conscious decision whether you want to stick to current material exclusively or include some degree of review material. The writer recommends the latter – recycling some older material, especially details that are often misused. It's especially useful to include at least some opportunity for students to differentiate between two “similar” items. For example, in Spanish, there are two distinct verbs for “to be” and two for “to know.” They are never interchangeable. If your students have (presumably!) learned one, and you've just introduced the second, include both on the translation. Require the students to think about both before they write.

Especially when learning different tenses and moods, comparisons are essential. It's one thing to do well on an assignment or test covering only one tense or mood. However, it requires a deeper understanding to compare, contrast, and choose the correct one! Translation provides a perfect opportunity for doing this.

Notice in the sample translation for Lesson 7.1 on the subjunctive (below), one sentence needs the indicative and another a direct command. It's important to get students in the habit of thinking broadly, not exclusively on the new grammar point. They need to discern how and when to use a tense or construction, not just assume that because it's a lesson on one thing, they can forget everything else.

Note: Shorter versions, taking only part of a class period, are useful after each short section of a longer chapter. A good rule of thumb is to write as many sentences as fit on a half sheet of paper, usually seven or eight, so that you can duplicate two to a page. A

great way to save even more paper is to have a short translation on one side and another activity (or the translation for the next lesson) on the back.

In class:

Note: The description of this activity refers to chalkboards or whiteboards. Lots of schools still have them, others are lucky enough to have smart boards, document cameras, or other higher-tech alternatives. If you're lucky enough to have one of the updates, great! Make the appropriate adjustments.

At the beginning of class, walk around the room to see if assignment has been completed or not. In your grade book, students get either a check to indicate completion or a fraction to show how much they did ($1/4$, $2/3$, etc.) No work, no credit – of course! Also, if students don't like your quick fractions, you can suggest they do the whole assignment!

Then use the name sticks (or whatever) to choose the students that will write the sentences on the whiteboard. (One student per sentence.) Did they come unprepared? They are still responsible. Students are allowed to consult with another student before they write on the board, but write they must.

When all the sentences are on the board (numbered!), start on the left side of the board and work around in "physical" order. It's *much* easier than going in numerical order. When you call the number, the student who wrote that sentence will read it aloud.

It's at this point you need to show your poker face – for the rest of the period. Using the name sticks, call on another random student asking for comments. This second student will compare the board version with his own. He will declare the sentence fine or offer a suggestion. If he suggests a change, you make it. Call on another (random) student. Get an "okay," a question, or a suggestion. Then turn it over to the class for discussion. Your role is to facilitate, not to dictate. Continue making corrections that students suggest (right *or* wrong!) and/or asking for input from the class. Students will make statements and ask questions. Encourage the students to do all the "work" themselves rather than you giving them all the corrections. Discuss relevant grammar points; it's an excellent time for clarifications and reminders. At some point, you will need to declare each sentence correct or make it correct, but hopefully, you'll have first generated some great analytical thinking on the part of your students.

As students become accustomed to this activity, they become more comfortable with the process. You'll find they gain confidence in offering suggestions and asking questions. Usually, the correct version of the sentence will come from the students themselves. It's wonderful to see them work together at this problem-solving.

The last component of this activity is for all students to leave class with the *correct* version. Encourage them to study these corrected versions. The writer likes to reward students for being conscientious before, during, and after this activity by putting all or part of one of these sentences on a test.

Translation is a valuable teaching and learning tool that should be utilized with some regularity. Handled correctly, this process is a big-time thinking activity. After (presumably!) learning the material, students apply their knowledge, then synthesize, analyze, and evaluate. What more could we ask?

Following are examples of culminating translations and shorter translations that can be used mid-chapter. Note the shorter versions fit two on a page.

Español I – Traducción – Capítulo 4

1. I don't live in a house; I live in an apartment.

2. To go downtown, I go on my bike.

3. How many (¿cuántos?) books are there in your backpack?

4. What do you take to school?

5. Is there a clock radio on your bookshelf or on the dresser?

6. Where is there a pencil sharpener?

7. Our plants are from Mexico!

8. some plants / a rug / the computer / the color T.V.

9. I like to go by (on) motorcycle!

10. Sir, is there a computer in your car?

11. Whose tapes are these? --They're Rafael's.

12. Our friends always carry calculators.

13. How many bedrooms are there in your house?

14. Is there a VCR in your house? in your room?

15. In my backpack, there are four books, twenty pens, my wallet, and a notebook.

Español I – Traducción 7.1 – El subjuntivo

1. It's great that you can talk to your parents.

2. I hope to travel around the world some day.

3. Sarita. stop playing and go to school!

4. It's important for you to do this assignment.

5. They want us to arrive early.

6. Are you angry I can't come to your party?

7. Oh, if only we can win this last game!

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