

Translation in the Writing Class: Friend or Foe?

Charles Kowalski
Tokai University

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Teachers of English writing often warn their students against direct translation from the native language. However, especially at beginning levels, a certain amount of translation is inevitable. This paper explores some common pitfalls in Japanese to English translation (particularly phrase structure and word choice), and suggests strategies for helping students translate their thoughts into more accurate written English.

英作文の授業において、多くの講師は母国語からの直訳は避けるべきであると指導しています。しかし、初級の学習者が英語で文章を作成する際に、母国語である日本語で考えその後英語に訳すのは避けられないことなのです。本稿は日英翻訳の注意すべき点(特に文章の構造と語彙の選択)を探究しながら、学習者が自らの考えをよりの確な英文に仕上げていく方法を紹介します。

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In the writing class, is translation from the native language a stumbling block or a steppingstone? Many, if not most, teachers would have no hesitation in giving the former answer. When the question, *How many people here encourage their students to think in their native language and translate into English, relying heavily on a dictionary?* was posed to an audience of writing teachers at the author's presentation, not a single participant answered in the affirmative. However, all participants admitted that when called upon to write something in a foreign language, particularly one with which they were not too comfortable, they were guilty of thinking in their native language and translating, often relying heavily on dictionaries. It would seem that, like it or not, translation in the writing class is a reality, especially at lower proficiency levels.

It is common for teachers to urge students to “think in English”, and students who are capable of doing so will most likely be capable of producing excellent English essays. To reach that stage, however, the student needs to become intimately familiar with written English—its grammar, vocabulary, collocations, figures of speech, and rhetorical structures—from an insider's point of view. This would require massive exposure to authentic samples of written English (i.e. extensive reading) and equally extensive writing practice.

This process definitely yields considerable rewards, but it often takes more time to produce results than is available in a semester-long writing course. For such a course to enable students, some of whom begin their first writing course with a very limited vocabulary and rudimentary understanding of English grammar, to express their thoughts in reasonably cohesive, well-organized, and grammatically correct written English, a certain amount of translation is inevitable.

This paper will explore some ways to make translation an aid, rather than an obstacle, to English writing. It will present techniques for raising awareness of key issues in translation, and examine criteria for selecting and using bilingual dictionaries.

Awareness

At the stage when students are still thinking in Japanese and writing in English, one of the first jobs of the teacher is to raise awareness of the kinds of transformations required for Japanese thought to become easily understandable English expression. The two broadest areas in which this awareness is required are phrase structure and vocabulary.

Phrase structure

English phrase structure is usually described as “subject-verb-object”, and Japanese as “topic-comment”. While these models do not capture the full range of grammatically possible sentences in either language, they accurately show the fundamental structure of both.

For Japanese learners of English, one of the greatest hazards of L1-L2 translation is retaining the original “topic-

comment” order in an English sentence, assuming that the topic (marked by *wa* in the Japanese original) will always fit neatly into the “subject” slot. Shibata (2001) illustrates several of the forms this can take:

Passivization	All dishes are used tomatoes.
Time expression + verb + NP	Tomorrow will go to China at last.
Be-verb insertion	Today is all day sleep. Today is at last see any island.
NP + is + SVO	Today was I watched movie. Today is I was absent-minded.
Location + verb + object	This place can drink as much as you want for 2 hours.
Object + verb	My car can't drive. The Milky Way couldn't see because it was cloudy.

Each of these errors arises from an imperfect understanding of English phrase structure, and an overextension of the Japanese pattern. Activities such as these have been useful in correcting them:

Phrase structure guides

The teacher provides a visual guide to English phrase structure, explaining what questions the sentence needs to answer in what order: *Who? [Does/did] what? To [what/whom]?* This basic framework can be expanded to show that the answers to further questions (*when? where? how? with whom?* etc.) can be included at either end of the sentence. (Please see Appendix A for an example.)

Sentence expansion

The teacher starts with a very simple SVO sentence (e.g. *The cat ate the cake*), and then asks students or groups to add words or phrases. At first, most of the contributions will be adjectives, or adverbs modifying them: *The big cat ate the cake. The very big cat ate the chocolate cake*. With some prompting from the teacher, students can be encouraged to contribute time expressions, adverbs of manner, prepositional phrases, or relative pronoun clauses: *Yesterday, the very big cat from Hadano happily ate the chocolate cake that my mother bought for my sister's birthday*. (Variation on Winer, 1995.)

Self-correction

Once students have become familiar with the basics of English phrase structure, the teacher can show examples similar (but not identical) to students' previous errors, for them to correct. In many cases, addition of one or two words will suffice: *Ashino Lake rode a swan boat*. → *On Ashino Lake, I rode a swan boat*.

Illustration

Sometimes an error in phrase structure leads to an absurd image that can be easily conveyed in a picture. For example, a sentence such as “This restaurant can eat delicious spaghetti” conjures up an image of a restaurant sitting down to a plate of steaming pasta. A picture, drawn on the blackboard or distributed to students can provide a humorous, and therefore easily memorable, example of how an English sentence constructed on the Japanese pattern can be misconstrued.

Vocabulary

By the time they take their first English writing class in high school or university, students have been exposed to English for several years, and have a reasonably extensive vocabulary, at the very least, in the receptive sense, already in place. This will probably be supplemented by frequent use of dictionaries throughout the course. One of the main challenges in translating vocabulary usefully from L1 to L2 consists in avoiding the trap warned about by Lewis (1993) and others, of thinking that there is a one-to-one correlation between L1 word and L2 word.

The hierarchy of difficulty for L2 forms compiled by Stockwell et al. (1965, cited in Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991) includes *coalesced* forms, where two or more items in the L1 correspond to one in the L2, and *splits*, the opposite case in which one L1 item becomes two or more in the L2. According to this classification, coalesced forms are relatively easy to master; it is a simple matter for a Japanese student when the words 命 *inochi*, 生命 *seimei*, 人生 *jinsei*, 生涯 *shogai*, 生活

seikatsu and 暮し *kurashi* can all be represented by the English word “life”. Splits, however, rank at the top of the hierarchy.

One common example of a split between Japanese and English is the word 見る *miru*. A Japanese-English dictionary will usually give three main equivalents (*see, look, watch*), and with some eliciting, students can generally supply basic rules for when to use which:

見る:	see (something that falls within your field of vision)
	look (intentionally at a stationary object)
	watch (something moving)

This does not, however, tell the whole story. For one thing, the rules are not as fixed as the diagram above might suggest. The exercise in Figure 1 contains some examples that straddle the boundaries between the categories shown above:

I like to _____ movies.
Did you _____ the game on TV last night?
I like to go to art museums and _____ the paintings.
Could you _____ my bag while I get a cup of coffee?
I _____ a UFO yesterday!
If you _____ into this telescope, you can _____ Mars.
I'm going to _____ my old friend this weekend.
I _____ a strange dream last night.

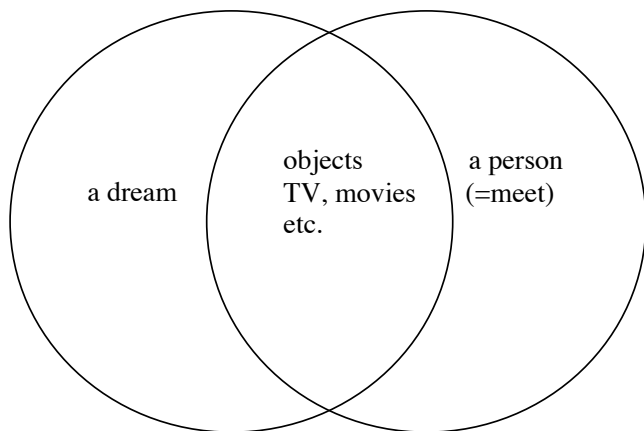
Figure 1. Exercise for English equivalents of 見る

In #1 and #2, for example, a case could be made for either “see” or “watch”. “Watch” in #4 refers not to a moving object, but to an object that the speaker is afraid *might* move if no one keeps an eye on it. #3 also sets a trap that many Japanese learners are prone to fall into: failure to supply a preposition after *look*.

In addition, the final two items are curve balls. #7 includes one of the words given as English equivalents for 見る, but in a context that would not call for that verb in Japanese. #8 is a contrary example: an expression that would call for 見る in Japanese, but an entirely different word in English.

This exercise illustrates that neither the coalesced, nor the split models of Stockwell et al.’s hierarchy cover all the bases. A more appropriate model might be *overlapping fields of meaning*: there are some areas where an L1 word and the L2 word(s) generally given as its equivalent will match, some meanings that the L1 word can convey that the L2 word cannot, and vice versa.

Figure 2 illustrates this using a Venn diagram. The left-hand circle shows the direct objects that commonly collocate with the Japanese verb 見る, while the right-hand circle contains those that often go with the English equivalents *see, watch* and *look [at]*. While there are many points where they overlap, there are some where the term in one language performs a function that its equivalent(s) in the other cannot. *I'm going to see my friend tomorrow* is a legitimate use of the English word *see* that would sound strange in Japanese. On the other side, **I see a dream today!* would strike most English speakers as odd.



見る see, look [at], watch

Figure 2. A Venn diagram illustrating overlapping fields of meaning

Thus, to ensure that Japanese lexical items are translated accurately into English, students need to have an awareness of overlapping fields of meaning. Diagrams and exercises like the ones above can help raise this awareness. In addition, awareness of collocations, such as the prepositions that can follow *look* in this example, is important. Ideally, students could acquire this awareness naturally through extensive reading and other forms of exposure to the language, but under the time constraints of a writing class, it

is more likely that they will be relying on their dictionaries. This brings us to the second topic: the choice and use of dictionaries.

Dictionary and translation software

Choice of dictionaries

At the beginning of a writing course, when the teacher is introducing the course requirements, some class time could well be devoted to methods of choosing a good bilingual or Japanese-English dictionary. Important selection criteria include:

- Multiple meanings. Does the dictionary give a sufficient number of English equivalents for each Japanese entry? Are there explanations to help the user understand when to use which? Do the given definitions account for overlapping fields of meaning?
- Example sentences. While explanations may be helpful in deciding when to use which English word for the desired Japanese word, example sentences are often clearer and easier to understand. Does the dictionary provide them?
- Collocations and idiomatic expressions. Does the dictionary show collocations for the given English words, and English equivalents for the common collocations of the Japanese word? Does it include equivalents for idiomatic expressions using Japanese words? One learner translated the Japanese expression 赤の他人 *aka no tanin* literally as “a red other person”; a careful check

of a good dictionary should have led to the equivalent “complete stranger” from the keyword 他人 *tanin*.

To raise awareness of the criteria for selecting a good dictionary, it is often helpful to ask students to complete an exercise like the one in Figure 2, then to check their answers after consulting a dictionary that meets all the above criteria.

Judicious use of dictionaries

Once students have used their discerning eyes to select good dictionaries, the next step consists in learning to use them wisely. Some useful skills to practice include:

- Crosschecking. After finding a new word in the Japanese-English section of a dictionary, confirming the meaning in the English-Japanese section is an essential step that students in a hurry often overlook. To illustrate the importance of this step, anecdotes where failure to crosscheck led to unintended results in the opposite situation (English-Japanese) may be helpful. An American of the author’s acquaintance, hosting a Japanese student, once tried to explain to her guest that her son was lost. Not succeeding in conveying the message in English, and not knowing the Japanese word, she read the first entry in her dictionary for “lost”, *nakunatta* – which would be perfect for describing a lost umbrella or suitcase, but when applied to a person, means *dead*. The Japanese student first recoiled in shock, then realized the mistake and burst out laughing.
- Abstract nouns and adjectives. Confusion between adjectives and their corresponding abstract nouns (free/freedom, kind/kindness, convenient/convenience, etc.) is a perennial problem among Japanese learners of English, leading to utterances like *I didn’t come to class last week because I was sickness*. In cases where a single Japanese word can correspond to either a noun or an adjective (e.g. 自由 *jiyuu* free/freedom), many if not most Japanese-English dictionaries unhelpfully put the abstract noun first, when most of the time, the adjective is what is needed. As straightforward as the choice may seem to native speakers of English, a simple rule that makes sense to native speakers of Japanese, where the boundaries between grammatical categories are often more elastic, is not easily made, and a set of rules that can cover all contingencies could fill a separate article. As a first step, though, dictionary crosschecking with special attention to grammatical categories could help prevent such errors.
- Pronouns. Students in a hurry will often compose sentences with exactly the same pronouns as appear in the dictionary, including indefinite ones like *one*, *somebody*, and *something*: *On New Year’s Day, I pay one’s first visit to a shrine*. A caution about this early in the course, and occasional gentle reminders as needed, may help reduce the occurrence of these errors.

Translation software

There are many programs available for sale or on the Internet that claim to be able to translate a Japanese passage instantly into English. Understandably, most writing teachers caution their students against the use of such software or ban it entirely, mainly for two reasons: first, that it defeats the purpose of a writing course if the student does not make the effort to write in English; and second, that translations produced by machine are usually nonsense.

Such admonitions do not always deter students from using translation software on occasion. To make the point clear that translation programs are far less reliable than students' own brains, a graphic illustration is often helpful. Appendix B contains a short passage from an introductory treatise on Japan (International Internship Programs, 1997, p. 138), translated into English using software available on the Internet, and then back into Japanese using the same software. Judo was chosen as a subject likely to be of interest even to less academically inclined students. It has been especially effective to ask a volunteer to read the last, *retranslated* paragraph aloud, check students' understanding (or lack thereof), and then distribute the handout.

Conclusion

Translation from the native language produces no end of headaches for writing teachers, but it is an inevitable stage through which learners must pass before attaining the state of being able to think and write directly in English. Given that, the relevant question would seem to be not whether translation is good or bad, but how to make the most effective

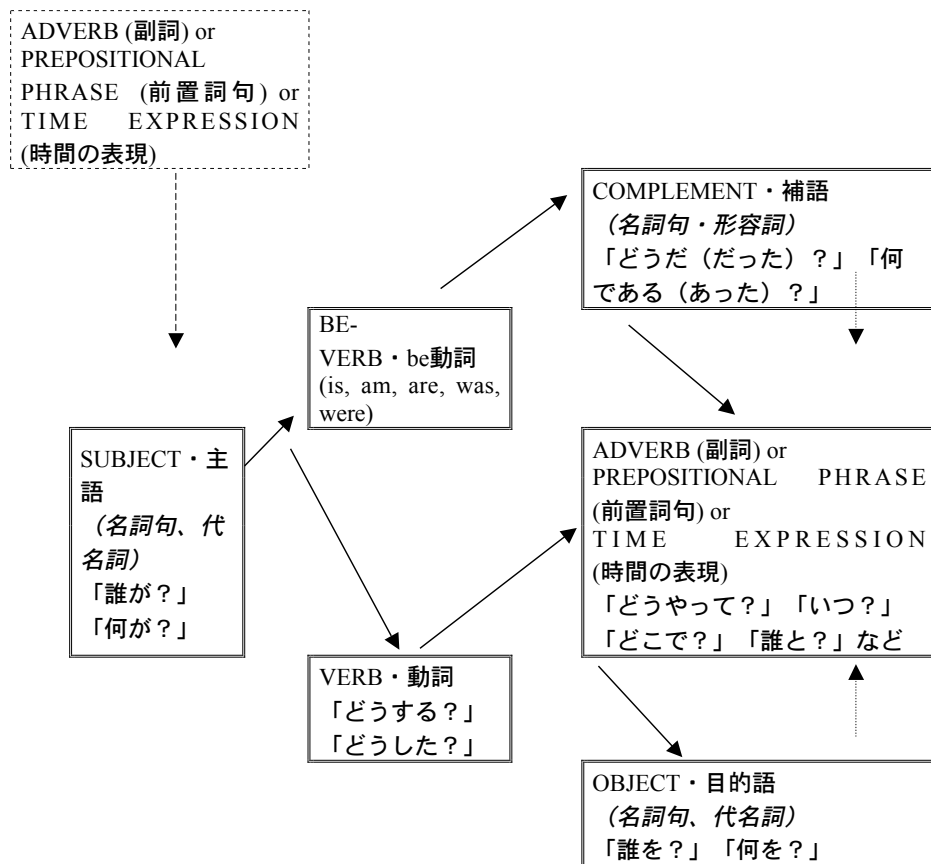
use of it in the classroom. The techniques presented here, used in conjunction with those that teachers already have at their command, are offered as possible means to that end.

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Appendix A

A sample phrase structure chart



Appendix B

Diagram showing the perils of machine translation

<p>柔道は江戸時代(1600~1868)の武士の護身術としては発達した。素手で攻撃から身を守り、相手を倒し、抑えることができる。明治時代(1868~1912)初期に、嘉納治五郎が単にスポーツとして確立しただけでなく、精神修養を目標とした講道館柔道を創設した。柔道は国際的スポーツとしても注目され、第18回オリンピック東京大会(1964)から正式競技種目となった。</p>	Original
↓	Machine translation into English
<p>Judo developed as an art of self-defense of the samurai of the Edo Period (1600 - 1868). A body is protected against the attack with its bare hands, and a partner is knocked down, and it can be restrained. Not only Kano Jigoro was just established as a sport but also way palace judo which made mental cultivation a goal was founded in Meiji age (1868 - 1912) early days. Even if international sport was taken, it paid attention, and judo became formal sporting events from a 18 times Olympic Tokyo convention (1964).</p>	
↓	Machine translation back into Japanese
<p>柔道は、Edo期間(1600年---1868年)の侍の自衛の技術として発達した。身体は、攻撃から素手で保護され、パートナーは、打ち倒され、それは、抑えられる。単に、スポーツとしてしかし、またKano Jigoroは、ほんのいま設立されなかった方法宮殿柔道精神耕作を生じさせたゴールが創設された 明治の時代1868年-1912年早い日国際スポーツがされたとしてもそれは、注意を払う柔道は、18倍から正式のスポーツのイベントになったオリンピック東京規則(1964年)</p>	