

## *Combining Grammar Translation and Task-Based Language Teaching*

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### **Abstract**

In this study, we create a ‘Translation-based TBLT Activity’ where L2 learners can acquire target grammar in a communicative manner by combining the grammar translation method and the communicative approach. In this activity, learners translate the sentences whose content is relevant to their daily-life communication, which can encourage them to express their culture and identity in the L2 in terms of sociolinguistics. Therefore, the aims of this activity are not only providing the translation practice with the learners but also showing them how differently their culture and identity are expressed in the language, in other words, their individual style of the L2 use. By comparing their translations to that of native speakers, they can see the differences and learn an authentic style of L2, which leads them to explore the culture and identity of the speaker. In a model Japanese class, we introduced the activity to test this idea. In the Japanese language (TL), there are different verb forms describing different levels of formality, and people choose different forms as they take the interlocutor’s social status and relationship with them into consideration. Thus, the form selection is expected to represent the learners’ culture and identity in politeness and social relationship. The subjects are international students in a Japanese college, and they were asked to select the verb forms in the translation task according to different interlocutors. The result shows that their form selections are all different, that is, their culture and identity are reflected in their Japanese language (L2).

Keywords: Grammar Translation Method, TBLT, Sociolinguistics

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## **1. Introduction**

This study will focus on language teaching methods in relation to sociolinguistics. The purpose of this study is to propose a new class activity design for L2 learning, which I call ‘Translation-based TBLT Activity,’ (where TBLT stands for ‘translation-based language teaching’) that combines the traditional grammar translation method and the communicative approach. When it comes to the development of L2 learners’ accuracy, the grammar translation method is one of the most effective ways to promote it. The main idea of the method is that the learners repeatedly translate given sentences from L1 to L2 or vice versa using the target grammar until the grammar is incorporated into their L2 language system, i.e. interlanguage (Selinker, 1972). On the other hand, the method restricts the learners’ autonomy by expecting them to objectively reproduce the sentences in the other language.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, people express their own culture and identity when using language, which is a true figure of communication. Concerning this, Niemeier (2014) points out that language is not only a communication tool but also reflects the context, such as the speaker’s own culture and identity. However, the grammar translation method does not allow L2 learners to express their own culture and identity, which is indispensable in real communication. This is because that grammar translation method is regarded as an impractical language teaching method. On the other hand, the communicative approach, that is, the counterpart of the grammar translation method allows L2 learners to express their culture and identity by being placed in a daily-life communicative situation, so it is very practical and effective in acquiring communication skills. When it comes to grammar teaching, however, the communicative approach is ineffective since L2 learners do not have many opportunities to get feedback from the teacher, unlike the grammar translation method. As stated above, each methodology has its own advantages and disadvantages, and the advantage for one may be a disadvantage of the other. The ‘Translation-based TBLT Activity’ has the potential to elicit the advantages of both methods, while covering both disadvantages and it can make it possible for L2 learners to acquire the target grammar in a communicative manner and show their autonomy; in other words, express their own culture and identity in L2 use.

## **2. Activity Design**

The core design structure of the activity is a translation, which aims at L2 learners’ acquisition of the target grammar, while the content is based on real-life communication where L2 learners can freely express their own culture and identity in L2. In order to motivate the learners to express these, the activity settings should be familiar for them since people become expressive and communicative in their own way when they make communication with close interlocutors, such as their family and friends in the everyday environment. In regard to this, Sharma (2018) reports that bidialectal people are likely to speak their own dialect with close members in their community. That is to say, those people express their culture and identity in daily-life communication, which is also true in the case of L2 learners. Thus, a real-life-setting-based communicative approach can illustrate how L2 learners’ culture and identity emerge in their L2 use, which is reflected in their style of language use, and how different the style is from that of a native speaker.

In light of this, a combination of the grammar translation method and TBLT, called the 'Translation-based TBLT Activity', is proposed. TBLT is one of the most frequently used communicative approaches to encourage L2 learners to use authentic L2 in a real-life conversational situation in which a given objective is set up and the learners are required to achieve it through communication such as shopping at a store and reserving a hotel room. Although TBLT usually indicates oral communication, the proposed activity is designed for L2 learners to participate in written communication with the target grammar/expressions.

### ***Aims of the activity***

(1) Development of the target grammar in a communicative manner:  
As Cook (2010) argues that the translation task and activity should be implemented communicatively, the content and goal of the translation task are set based on daily-life conversational situations so that the learners can work in a communicative manner. Further, the learners compare and analyze their translation with the group members before receiving the teacher's feedback, which helps them to have a proactive attitude for grammar study and to consider how and why they translated the sentences.

(2) Learning the native speaker's style of L2 use:  
By comparing the learners' to the native speaker's translations, the learners can understand an authentic style of L2 use (specifically, target grammar). Through learning it, they can also explore the L2 speaker's culture and identity, which plays a role in cross-cultural learning.

### ***Flow of the activity***

(1) The teacher sets the communicative setting and prepares the sentences for translation (into L2) based on the context. The point is that the context should be familiar in order for the learners to regard the situation as real-life communication.

(2) The teacher needs to arrange the parts where the learners are expected to use the target grammar.

(3) The learners work on the translation activity individually.

(4) The learners compare and analyze their own translation to the native speaker's translation with the teacher and classmates (group discussion).

(5) The teacher checks and corrects the students' translation (feedback).

### ***Model of the activity***

I introduced the activity as a model case in my Japanese class in February 2019. In this activity, the students select verb forms with different levels of formality according to the interlocutor's social status and relationship with them, and it is expected that the form selections reflect their own culture and identity (in this case, mostly in politeness and social relationship); that is, their style of Japanese use, which can be different from that of a Japanese native speaker.

Regarding these forms of the Japanese language, there are basically four types with different grammatical structures: honorific forms, humble forms, polite forms, and

casual forms. In this study, these forms are categorized into three groups in terms of the levels of formality as below.

**Respectful language group:** honorific/humble forms

- These forms are used to show respect to the interlocutor. The honorific form is used for the actions performed by the interlocutor, while the humble form is used for the actions performed by the learners. These forms are the most formal.

**Formal language group:** polite forms

- These forms are also used to show respect to the interlocutor, but the level of formality of this form is lower than that of the honorific/humble forms.

**Informal language group:** casual forms

- These forms are used to show friendliness to the interlocutor, so the level of formality is the lowest among these forms.

***Subjects' profile***

- Participants: 12 international college students in Japan
- Nationality: Chinese, Taiwanese, Vietnamese, Mongolian, Bangladeshi, Nepali, American, German, French
- Japanese level: Intermediate ~ Advanced
- Target grammar: honorific/humble forms, polite forms, and casual forms

The following shows the details of the activity.

(1) **Class content:** Use of verb forms in different levels of formality

**Target grammar:** Honorific/humble, polite and casual forms

(2) **Setting:**

The students send an email to three different people at the college: *the college president, a close staff member, and a friend*. The students translate the same email sentences to each person, with the level of formality varying depending on the relationship distance with the recipient. The purpose of the email is to invite them to a school event as an organizer. The sentences to be translated are as follows.

-----  
Hello. I'm (your name).

We will have a school event next week and would like to invite you.  
In this event, we will introduce foreign cultures and serve international food

Further, our special guest, the Vice President will sing a song for us!  
Also, we will have a karaoke competition and select the best singer.

The event will start at 1 PM in the gym on February 4<sup>th</sup>.  
I hope you can join our event and have fun with us.

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(3) **Form selection:**

The students need to select the forms in the translation according to each recipient's different social status and the relationship with them.

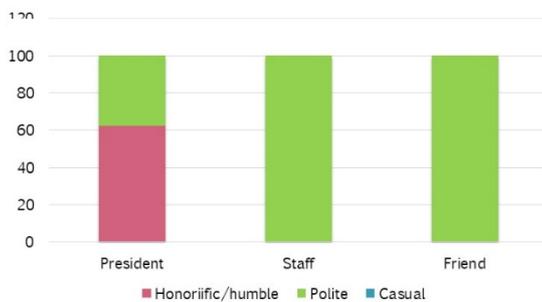
(4) **Group discussion:**

The students compare the differences of their translation with their classmates' and also with the native speaker's translation, which leads them to learn an authentic style of language use, including the target grammar.

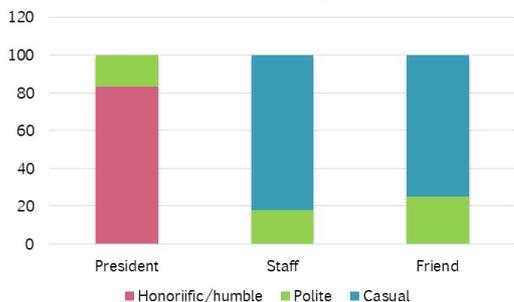
**3. Case Study**

To show how differently the students express their cultural and social context through the form selections, I will analyze the differences between two subjects (a Chinese and a French student). The outcome is described below.

Figure 1: Usage Percentage of Each Form in the E-mail  
Form Selections by Chinese



Form Selections by French



Note: Usage Percentage of the Form = (Number of the Form)/ (Number of All Forms)

The index number indicates the usage percentage of each form which is calculated by dividing the number of all forms in the email by that of the particular form in the email. In the case of the Chinese student's form selection for *the college president*, for example, the usage percentage of honorific/humble forms is around 60 percent while that of the polite form is about 40 percent (that of the casual form is 0 percent).

**Data Analysis**

Looking firstly at the case of the president, both students chose honorific/humble and polite forms and combined these forms to make the sentences. Hence, their form selections are similar to each other even though the usage percentage of each form is different. Considering the president's social status in a college, it is natural for the

students to choose honorific/humble forms, so their form selections, in this case, seem to follow the Japanese cultural and social context.

On the other hand, there is a big difference in the form selections for the cases of the close staff members and friends. In both cases, the Chinese student chose the polite form 100 percent of the time, while the French student chose the casual form across the board. Looking at the difference from another perspective, the Chinese student prioritized the official relationship with the event organizer over the personal one, which is a similar perspective as that of the Japanese. On the other hand, the French student prioritized the personal relationship with the friend over the official one. This describes the differences in the style of Japanese language use between these two students, that is, their culture and identity in politeness and social relationships.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In language pedagogy, it is very important for L2 learners to improve both accuracy and fluency. Although the 'classic' grammar translation method can lead the learners to improve their accuracy precisely and smoothly, the method still lacks practicality in real-life communication. However, the Translation-based TBLT Activity, which introduces the elements of one of the communicative approaches, i.e. TBLT, can encourage the learners to improve both accuracy and fluency at the same time. Further, the method can also provide the opportunity to explore the L2/other language speaker's culture and identity, and to reconfirm their own culture and identity through comparing their translations and understanding authentic styles of Japanese language use. In fact, another communicative aspect of the activity is to promote the learners' discussion (communication) on how and why the context of the speaker's culture and identity appears in the form selections, which may differ from their classmates and teacher.

Apart from this study, the research will be continued by collecting more data. Although the data of the Chinese and the French students was qualitatively compared and analyzed in the case study, it can be possible to quantitatively do so after enough data is collected. Further, I will classify the subjects by their L1, age, gender, proficiency of Japanese, etc. in order to compare and analyze how differently the subjects make grammar errors and select the form(s) from multiple perspectives. This will lead to clarification and allow for categorization of the error patterns and the contexts of the speaker's culture and identity, that is, the style of Japanese language use. Based on this analysis, it is expected that the teacher can provide an individual learning methodology with an individual student in consideration of his/her error patterns and the style of Japanese language use. I believe that the methodology based on the data will be very effective for Japanese language learners to improve their proficiency dramatically. This research will also provide an activity model so that other language teachers can also introduce the activity, collect data, and improve their teaching methodology for their students.

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