

Alternate Ways to Use Translation to Teach English:
Using Peanuts Comics in a Japanese ESL Classroom
英語教授のために訳読を用いる上での代替的方法：
日本の ESL クラスにおける漫画ピーナッツの利用

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要 旨

第二言語学習の方法として訳読を利用することは、世界の至る所において長い教育の歴史の中で見られることであるが、とりわけ日本で顕著となっている。研究者の中には、現代の外国語指導において、あまり頻繁に訳読が用いられるべきではないと考える人もいる。しかし、第二言語として英語を教える (ESL) 場においては、改良を加えさえすれば、多くの利点がある。本稿は、大学の ESL 教室という環境下で、「ピーナッツ」という漫画を、第二言語として英語を教えるために利用する教育方法を提案し、その有効性を立証する。この方法は、コミュニケーション英語に的を絞っている。

本稿の構成は、まず、言語学習における訳読法の背景を述べる。次に、漫画「ピーナッツ」を用いた学習方法の概要を説明する。次に、実際の授業における学習者の活動を分析し、考察する。最後に、本手法において考慮する点を述べ、まとめとしている。

キーワード：ESL 教育、翻訳、アニメと教育、コミュニケーション能力

Abstract

Using translation as a method of second language learning has a long history around the world, but it has been especially prominent in Japan. Some scholars believe that translation should not be used very often in modern times to teach foreign languages. However, there are many benefits to using translation in ESL classrooms—with modifications. The authors have established a unique method that uses Peanuts comic strips to teach English in a university ESL classroom environment in Japan. This method focuses on teaching communicative English. This paper gives a brief background of translation methods used in language learning, and then outlines the authors' method. The authors give a concrete example of a comic strip used in a university ESL class. An actual Peanuts comic strip used by the authors is analyzed. The authors explain the method step-by-step and the theory behind it. This concludes with an explanation of special considerations for ESL instructors to think about when using this method.

Keywords: ESL Education, Translation, Comics in education, Communicative Competence

Introduction

Translation methods have been used throughout history. Many people do not feel that translation is an effective tool to teach modern communicative English. However, the

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authors have designed a teaching method that relies on translation of Peanuts comic strips from Japanese to English. Students are encouraged to think about communicative expressions used in modern English, while they also study cultural norms that go hand-in-hand with communicative language learning. Since the comic strips are written in a colloquial form, they give students a perfect opportunity to examine modern communicative English. Finally, students can look at how the original translator expressed the ideas and learn from that information as well.

Background

The grammar translation method (GTM) was used for a long time around the world as a primary way to teach English. It has since been considered obsolete and generally thought of as not being a good way to teach a foreign language. It was originally used to teach Greek and Latin, languages that were not used in daily conversation (Hall, 2001). It served its purpose, to be sure, in order to facilitate comprehension of these ancient forms of communication—helping people learn mainly to read and write the languages.

Japan followed suit and used the GTM, along with other translation methods (Cook, 2010). Here in 2021, many of the senior teachers of English in Japan were taught using translation methods, to include the GTM, along with other translation techniques. One can find various translation methods still in use in Japan at all different levels and types of language education.

Since Japan was originally wanting to get information from foreign countries through literature from abroad, the GTM was very useful for the same reason that people wanted to study Greek and Latin. However, in modern society where we are trying make people competent in communicative techniques and proficient in daily conversation, the strict GTM rules seem outdated and not very useful (Zou & Niu, 2015). However, critics of the GTM seem to often lump all forms of translation together. There also seems to be a general feeling that all translation should be avoided when teaching a foreign language, by many contemporary instructors (Saito, n.d.). Still, Japanese are accustomed to using methods that use translation. It is the authors' opinion that translations methods can be used to teach English effectively in Japan. Japanese are used to this method and they are comfortable studying in this way. However, there needs to be a modification to the traditional methods that will lead to the final goal of helping students learn the language in order to communicate.

With this in mind, the authors have established a system of using conversational English language materials as a base for studying English in a communicative way. There will be an explanation of the method used where Peanuts comic strips are taken and incorporated into the ESL classroom and a real example will be shown. These are methods that require translation, then thinking about possible variations, and finally using the strips to teach cultural information—helping the students understand that there is a connection between language and culture that cannot be overlooked when one studies a foreign language.



Figure 1. Cover of a Peanuts book featuring SNOOPY

Method

Figure 1 shows a common book that is one of a series that one can easily purchase from booksellers in Japan. The book of Peanuts comic strips was originally written by Charles M. Schulz in English, and then translated into Japanese by a famous Japanese poet and writer, Shuntarō Tanikawa. This series of books is a collection of those comic strips that were previously syndicated and published new in newspapers around the world in the second half of the twentieth century.

Tanikawa has taken care to make the translations meaningful in Japanese. Translating is not an easy job. Sometimes things can be translated directly, while at other times one must make liberal alterations that not only change the meaning slightly but work hard to express the main points that the original author is trying to convey. In the case of Peanuts comic strips, since humor is also involved. Another point that the translator must focus on when trying to convey the proper mood of the situation, is to make sure the reader can find the humor in the target language. Shuntarō Tanikawa obviously made every effort to ensure this was done well.

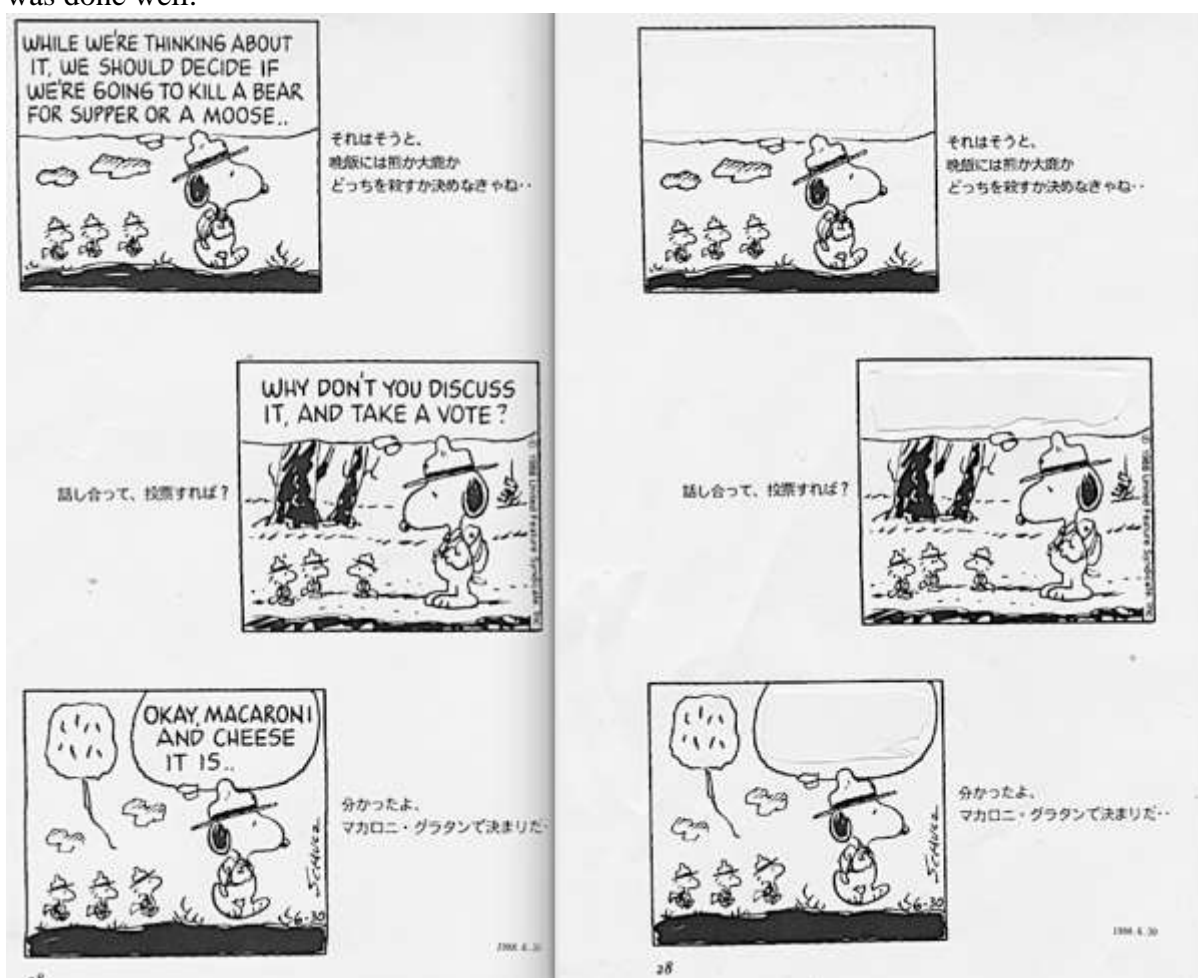


Figure 2. Examples of Tanikawa's Japanese translations for Peanuts

Look at Figure 2 to get an example of a worksheet that is prepared for use in the language classroom. This was used for a group of first- and second-year university students in Japan. The instructor prepared the material from a page of the book used in Figure 1. Students were handed the prepared version on the right side of Figure 2. The Japanese students were asked to translate the Japanese into English. Second language learners are always searching for ways to translate their ideas from many aspects of their lives into the second language. The idea being that translating from the mother language (L1) to the second

language (L2) is the best way for the students to make use of their ability to translate from L1 and express themselves in L2 (Saito, n.d.). In this translation exercise, students have to find the words to make the L1 Japanese understandable in a communicative form in L2. Translating from Japanese to English provides them with this practice and gives them a basis for further use of these expressions in real-life situations.

In a classroom situation, where such an activity will be used for study, it is important that the students have a way of learning necessary vocabulary. This can be handled by the use of dictionaries or even coaching by the instructor. Students can be given this as an individual project, a group project, or even worked on as an entire class group project. It is really up to the instructor and might be determined based on the level of the students in the classroom or other considerations. When students have problems with expressions, the same methods can be used, and it might require coaching by the instructor.

Students should be encouraged to use the method of the original translator as mentioned above: They should know that they can change things and not necessarily translate them directly. This helps them with their ability to be able to take their own ideas and express them using the expressions that they know. Instructors should be careful to let students have leeway and liberally translate the expressions to simply communicate the ideas. This in itself is practice for communicative English (Saito, n.d.).

The method used by the authors to collect the translated expressions is to elicit students as individuals or groups to explain how they have translated each expression. The students' ideas are written on the board and analyzed based on their grammatical correctness and whether or not they have translated the ideas correctly, with the entire class. In a class of university students, every student or every group is asked to say how they translated each expression. Students will quickly realize that there are many ways to say the same thing. Not only can different vocabulary be used, but there can also be different expressions that express the same thing. Students are afforded the ability to analyze this information and increase their communicative competence.



Figure 3. Examples of Tanikawa's Japanese translations for Peanuts

Examples of students' translation are shown in the following. Figure 3 was used by the authors in class and students were asked to translate Japanese speech into English. Especially the last speech in this strip is a good teaching material both grammatically and semantically. The original speech is "I should not have said that." The students in this class are freshman intermediate learners of English. They studied English grammar systematically in high school but they rarely have chances to use English at present. Students who remembered the the use of auxiliary verb translate the Japanese into correct English, but some wrote "I should not say that." Although this is grammatically correct, it does not show the feeling of "regret" as the character means. The authors explained the difference of these two expressions. Some good expressions were collected as well. Students who understand the subjunctive mood wrote "I wish I had not said that." Also, "I regret saying that" is another good expression written by those who remember gerund use with verb. As mentioned above, the direct translation is not necessary and some tried showing the feeling by using basic expressions and wrote English such as "Why did I say that?", "I didn't have to say that", and "Oh, no. That was my mistake." These expressions are well translated conveying the original meaning. Students whose English is not good wrote "I am not trash!" and "I am sorry." They also expressed the feeling well although the meaning is not exactly the same as the original one.

Thus, different answers can be shown to students according to the features of their mistakes for more understanding. For example, grammatical points can be focused on first and then different nuances of expressions can be compared. This method will make students notice the connection between grammar and meaning clearly. It is the most important aspect in communication.

One of the unique factors that comes into play with using comic strips is the visual effects. Students were encouraged to look at the pictures and think about what the situation called for. When using this method, you will often have to remind the students of this fact. A good example of this can be seen when looking back at Figure 2, the middle frame offers a good example of how students need to actually look at the pictures, and not just read the text. People familiar with Japanese know that when speaking the Japanese language one can often omit the subject in a sentence. In order to make a good sentence in English, students have to think about the subject. (This is a point that must be made clear if you plan to use translation from Japanese to English, especially.) In the case of the middle frame, students were wondering whether the expression should be “Let’s discuss it,” or “Why don’t you discuss it.” Obviously, the speaker in the frame is the dog, who is watching the group discuss the question, and not taking part in that action himself. So, by looking at the picture, the students come up with the subject being *you (all)* instead of *us*, making something like, “Why don’t you discuss it?” the correct answer. The picture is the primary hint in this area.

Figure 4 is another example of the subject translation. The original speech in the last frame has two subjects, “I” in the main clause and “he” in the subordinate clause. However, the Japanese has no subject to corresponding to each. Students have to think about who is glad and who warned whom. The frame shows that Snoopy is talking, so students can guess it is his feeling. Also, the sunglasses he wears indicate that he is not happy about the boy’s speech. Then students will be able to translate this into English easily. Students’ answers show their understanding of the speech. For example, some students wrote “Thank you for warning”, or “I’m glad you told me that.” The word “you” is obviously sent to the boy. Therefore, pictures help imagine the feelings of the speech.

Another factor is the cultural aspects of the cartoon. In the top frame of Figure 2, there is mention of a *moose*. This animal is not likely to be known to Japanese students. This gives an opportunity to explain what a moose is, where they are found, their lifestyles, etc. Another unique thing is the *macaroni and cheese*. Japanese readers will be quick to note that the original translator, Shuntarō Tanikawa has taken the liberty of changing it to *macaroni gratin*. This is because macaroni and cheese does not exist as a regular food item in Japan. In this particular case, a careful explanation of macaroni and cheese as a culturally significant food that is loved by many children in the US is very important. Moreover, the punchline to the cartoon is based on this culturally significant item.



Figure 4. Examples of Tanikawa's Japanese translations for Peanuts



Figure 5. Examples of Tanikawa's Japanese translations for Peanuts

Figure 5 is a conversation between a brother and a sister. The girl wants to leave her house when she grows up. In some western countries it is quite natural for young people to think of leaving their own town as soon as possible and become independent. The girl in this strip shows her spirit of independence. She thinks that she is not living her own life yet. Japanese students may not understand the punchline “Where are we?” Without the knowledge of that cultural difference, it will confuse them and possibly lead them think that the girl hates her family. For her last speech as the punchline of this strip, many students wrote “What do you mean?” It shows that they actually do not find the speech humorous. More students wrote “Where is here?” and it is translated directly from Japanese. The usage “here” is grammatically mistaken and they mean “Where is it here?” However, even though, they do not understand the humor.

These culturally significant items can be explained in differing levels of detail. As an American native English speaker, one of the authors has his unique experience with the culture that enables him to elaborate on this point. A Japanese teacher of English might or might not have the experience that will allow him/her to comment too much on this subject. An instructor can weigh up how important the cultural aspects are to a complete understanding of the comic strips. In this example, one could simply focus on the expression, “Okay, macaroni and cheese it is.” An instructor could argue that the students simply learning this expression and its grammar is the more important thing. This may be true. However, understanding the cultural aspect of the communication makes it more interesting in many researchers’ opinions (e.g., Genc & Bada, 2005), and interest leads to motivation to study and remember the information. This can be significant indeed.

When cultural aspects in comic strips are focused on, humor plays an important role. Whether it is funny or not will influence learners’ motivation to read. Humor can promote understanding and attract the attention of the students (Al-Noori, 2019). It also makes atmosphere of leaning more comfortable and it will make students more active. In language classes, students will be motivated to use the language by materials with humor. Cook (2021) also argues that humor and focus on form can converge in authentic acts of communication. Comic strips are made up by conversation and reflect the authenticity of spoken language. Therefore, comic strips with speech in English will help students enjoy learning how to use the language in English-speaking societies.

Comic strips of short frames such as Peanuts usually have punchlines in the last frame. Since Peanuts is not slapstick but offers humor more linguistically, understanding the punchlines is helpful to gain sense of humor and learn communication skills in English. Peanuts was in American newspapers since 1950 to 2000 and adult people enjoyed reading it. Therefore, humor in Peanuts often reminds readers of something pathetic or delightful in their childhood. It sometimes even includes a philosophical aspect (Williams, 2021). Because of that, it can be enjoyed by college students. They will find not only familiarity with its pictures but also empathy with characters’ honest but humorous ways of thinking. College students become positive for activities using this material.



Figure 6. Examples of Tanikawa's Japanese translations for Peanuts

Some examples show students' positiveness. When Figure 6 was used in class, a lot of students interpreted the punchline in their own style. The original speech is "I suppose I have to let him win, too." Here are some examples of students' translations. "This game is doomed." "Does he want me to lose the game?" "I should make you win." Each expression is slightly different from each other in terms of the speakers' emotion. It is clear that students did not translate Japanese into English directly. They changed the speech but retained the annoyed feeling. From the these examples, it can be said that students enjoy leeway for expression in this activity. Therefore, translation method can enhance students' motivation and acquire communication skills in English if instructors allow them flexibility.

Understanding and expressing humor requires high cognitive activity. It is an additional ability besides knowledge of English. However, students will enjoy making jokes or punchlines in class because they know it is fun. In accordance with this theory, the authors have an activity of open writing. Students were asked to make a punchline for Peanuts strips. This leads to enhancement of their skills of reading, understanding visual aids, imagining the development of story. More importantly, they will also acquire a communication skill.

Here are some examples of the punchlines of Figure 6. The students who had this activity are sophomores of one of the author's colleges, and their English is intermediate. Students had to read the strips and make a punchline corresponding to the picture in the last frame.

1. "I am feeling depressed."
2. "I am playing it with him every day."
3. "You've been worried (thinking) for 5 hours."
4. "Aren't you depressed again?"

5. "Should I lose?" "I will let him win."
6. "I won.... Don't be depressed."
7. "You just wanted to play it, didn't you?"
8. "If I win, he will be more depressed."

Each punchline is written humorously and accords to the perplexed look of the character. The language is very simple but it expresses the twist in the story well. It is certain that students tried using various functions cognitively. Since it has to be funny, they can enjoy making the funny speech. After all the speeches were collected, they were shown to students in class. The author explained them one by one about the meaning and grammar usage which students wrote so that they can understand them. This is very important because students can understand other people's sense of humor and language usage. It will lead to their development of their communication skills.

Points to remember

It is very important to have students remember that there is not just one correct answer, and there are many ways to say anything. They should be encouraged to try their best at just saying something, and remembering the that proverb that says, *practice makes perfect*, can be true here. Students who are shy or are less motivated should be encouraged to work with others, and not worry about getting it wrong. The authors will often just do the work with the students if they find it to difficult. Sometimes it is just important to focus on the vocabulary and simple phrase forms.

As with these authors, many instructors will likely use these cartoons as a supplement to other materials. When choosing what cartoons to use, teachers have to try to make them applicable to some grammar point that students are presently studying. When talking about health problems, for example, one can find conversations where the characters go to the doctor. Seasonal topics are also interesting. There are plenty of comic strips based on holidays such as Christmas, Halloween or Valentine's Day, for example.

If teachers use these comic strips on a limited basis, fair use laws may come into effect. These laws provide a way for instructors to use copyrighted material on a limited basis for the purpose of education. However, if you plan to use the materials on a regular basis, it might be important to buy these books and have them assigned as a text for each student in the course.

Conclusion

While the grammar translation method is often seen as obsolete, translation can be used as a form of English study in an ESL classroom. Modifications to the original theory must be made, and the general material to be used should be considered carefully. One idea is to use Peanuts comic strips and let students translate communicative expressions from L1 to L2. This will give them the opportunity to practice speaking their own minds in their L2. By sharing their work with many people and looking at the original material, the students will be able to experience and practice their L2 skills in a classroom environment and have a basis for building their own communicative competence. Using the Peanuts comic strips also affords the students the ability to study the cultural aspects of the language and help motivate them to keep studying through this connection. Instructors can use these materials to supplement other texts and use them effectively in a classroom environment.

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