



Translation and Own-language Activities

Authors: Philip Kerr

Publisher: Cambridge University Press, 2014

ISBN: 9781107645783

Pages: 174 pages

Reviewer: Matthew Miklas

Translation and Own-language Activities is by and large a very useful text to expand instructors' menu of teaching techniques. In light of the fact that NNEs (non-native English speaker) teachers outnumber NES (native English speaker) teachers and continue to grow (Medgyes, p. 433), there is a dire need for teaching literature which enriches the resources of instructors who can leverage L1 to actually aid acquisition rather than literature which simply argues the case for L1 use from a theoretical standpoint.

The first half of the book comprises an overview with some discourse on the philosophy of using L1, L1 techniques for the teacher, and learning tools for classroom application. The second half contains the real meat of the book, a series of nearly 40 activities for weaving L1 into the classroom in a way intended to improve students' ability to understand and practice English.

The first unit is a heaping tablespoon of conscience-easing for those instructors who are already using L1 in the ELT classroom. The justification Kerr gives for using L1 in the classroom rests on a bedrock of research spanning decades. Such information is especially useful for teachers who are accosted by colleagues in the event that they are forced to defend their use of L1 in class.

By putting some activities in a series of variations on the same principle, instructors are able to add a wider variety of activities at their disposal while reducing the burden on the teacher to grasp a new concept for each activity, which in turn reduces the burden on the students to understand a new concept if the teacher just uses a variation on an activity already done. By doing so, it demonstrates how flexible the activities are once the concept is applied, and encourages further expansion for the creatively-inclined teacher.

What prevents this book from benchmark status in practically integrating L1 to the classroom is its lack of clarity of focus as to who its intended readership is. It states in the introduction that the activities assume that the learners and instructor share the same language. This means that NES teachers who have any proficiency in the host country's L1 account for none of the book's intended audience.

If that is the case, and the book supposes a readership composed only of NNEs teachers, there is one more element which would allow the target readership to benefit even more from it: a simplification of the language. As most NNEs teachers, by their own regard, have a good but not excellent vocabulary size (Nemtchinova, p. 242; Wang, p. 73) this book would benefit from having its language graded. While it might not be necessary to simplify it to the extent of some recent publications intended for a global ELT audience (Nation, 2013), it would be best to not compel NNEs readers to wade through sentences like "[n]euroscience confirms that the initial acquisition of new words in a foreign language depends on the association of these items with corresponding own-language items in the learner's memory" (p. 5) or sentiments such as "it is perverse to promote mediation while banning the students' own language" (p.7).

Fortunately, the complexity of language used in the activities section -- the meat of the book -- may only mildly frustrate rather than prevent your average NNES teacher from being able to understand the techniques or activities.

The identity crisis of the book -- whether it wants to be more scholarly or more accessible, especially those whose first language is not English -- does not stop *Translation and Own-language Activities* from being worthy of a place on the shelves of EFL teaching institutes everywhere.

References

- Medgyes, P. (2001). When the teacher is a non-native speaker. *Teaching English as a second or foreign language*, 3, 429-442.
- Nation, P. (2013). *What should every EFL teacher know?* Compass Publishing.
- Nemtchinova, E. (2005). Host teachers' evaluations of nonnative-English-speaking teacher trainees—A perspective from the classroom. *TESOL Quarterly*, 39(2), 235-261.
- Wang, D. (2014). Effects of study abroad on teachers' self-perceptions: A study of Chinese EFL teachers. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 5(1), 70-79.