

# Using translation in ESL classrooms: An Asian perspective

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## ABSTRACT

Due to the acceleration of globalization, Asian people are facing a growing need of communicating and trading with English speaking countries, which in return drives English language teaching and learning to become increasingly important in some Asian countries. At the same time, English teachers are seeking effective teaching methods which can best assist and facilitate students' learning process. Although translation as a teaching method is criticized by many researchers due to its limitations and weaknesses in terms of language learning itself, it is still widely used in ESL (English as a Second Language) classrooms to facilitate students' understanding and memorizing relevant materials. Considering the disadvantages of translation used in language classrooms, this paper especially reviews the benefits of using translation and examines its necessity in ESL classes from both English language learners' and educators' perspectives. It reports a study conducted with the participation of fifteen TESOL students from China, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, and Singapore in an Australian university context. These students all have experiences in learning and/or teaching English language. The study involved semi-structured interviews and journal writings which reflect the participants' experiences in using translation in English language learning and/or teaching. The final findings disclosed that although translation can make it easy to teaching and/or learning English, both English teachers and learners should limit the use of translation in and out of ESL classrooms.

Keywords: ESL classrooms, TESOL, language learning and teaching, translation.

## INTRODUCTION

With growing importance of English as a global language in the world, TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Language) has become an emphasized profession, which in return drives various language teaching methods and approaches involving audiolingualism, community language learning and communicative language teaching to be introduced into ESL (English as a Second Language) classrooms (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Nevertheless, translation as a traditional and ancient teaching method is still applied by a great number of teachers in ESL classrooms and plays an important part in

English teaching and learning. Translation has a long history in language teaching, it provides “equivalents” in the learners’ mother tongue to help them learn syntax and lexis of the target language easily and effectively. It is viewed as the most acceptable and favorite model of language teaching which can be used as a convenient shortcut especially concerning grammar and vocabulary teaching (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

Some educators believe that translation as a teaching method can serve a useful instructive means in English language acquisition. Hummel (1990) highly values the significance of translation as a teaching method in ESL (English as a Second Language) classrooms. He points out that, for a group of learners who speak the same native language, translation would be the most effective strategy and may contribute to a detailed and impressive memory encoding (Hummel, 1990). Also, while some researchers believe that translation is serving as an effective tool in the understanding of target languages (Kern, 2008; Mallol, 2003; Wechsler, 1998; Wiersema, 2005), others see long-standing use of translation as an obstacle to the development of capacity of target languages (Luo, 2007; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Both the benefits and limitations of translation as a teaching method are discussed by researchers and educators from different perspectives. Therefore, there is an obvious increasing awareness about the effectiveness of using translation in ESL classrooms.

This paper is based on a study conducted with the participation of fifteen TESOL students from China, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, and Singapore in an Australian university context. It critically reviews the benefits and examines the necessity of using translation in ESL classes from both English language learners’ and educators’ perspectives. The findings disclosed that the translation can make it easy to teaching and/or learning English and both English language teachers and learners tend to use translation to facilitate their teaching and learning process. Nevertheless, it is suggested that English teachers and learners should limit the use of translation in and out of ESL classrooms as long-standing use of translation may be an obstacle to the development of the practical capacity of the target language.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

With the acceleration of globalization, communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds has become increasingly important. This drives translation to become an indispensable “bridge” for intercultural communication (Nida, 1975). Translation is a highly valued approach for people to overcome the linguistic and cultural barriers and to achieve an effective and successful intercultural communication. In order to effect the communication among people from various language backgrounds, translation is being used at almost any given moment. It serves as a means of information delivery in various situations, such as international conferences and summits, importations and exportations, international customs, transportations and foreign affairs, etc. It is occurring in specific communicative settings for particular purposes and becoming an integral part of the modern society (Jin & Cortazzi, 2002). The use of translation as a crucial means of intercultural interactions is as overwhelming as ever.

Since translation is defined as the process of converting information such as thoughts and arguments from one language into another language, it is appreciably valued as a helpful technique and a useful instructive means for language learning and acquisition (Hartmann & Stork, 1972). It can not only help language learners understand and comprehend second languages easily and effectively, but also provide them with the first experience of a foreign tongue and an exercise to better understand original materials (Kuhiwczak & Littau, 2007; Wechsler, 1998). Hummel (1990) also points out that, for a group of learners who speak the same native language, translation would be the most effective strategy and may contribute to a detailed and impressive memory encoding. Translation could be a natural and essential activity often accompanied with language teaching and learning. Language teachers and learners tend to facilitate their understanding of the target language by translating the target language into the native language (Mallol, 2003).

For one thing, translation may be the easiest means of explaining the meanings of words, phrases and grammatical rules within the target languages. As L1 (First Language) shapes people's thinking, language learners tend to use their first languages to facilitate L2 (Second language) learning especially translating the meanings of L2 into L1 to get better understanding of L2, grasp the knowledge of L2 and memorize the relevant information (Mallol, 2003). Moreover, in language classrooms, L1 can create conveniences for both teachers and students. While teachers use L1 to transmit the meanings of L2, illustrate particular language phenomenon, clarify language rules, and manage the class well, students can clearly see the relationships between language usage and grammar and use L1 to assist in collaborative and individual learning (Mallol, 2003). In addition, it is believed that language learners' strong competence in their mother languages can contribute to the enhancement of second language skills. Hence, language learners can make the most of their mother tongues to facilitate their second language learning (Luo, 2007).

For another thing, translation can be serving an increasingly important function for people to understand and learn foreign cultures. It is believed that the process of translation offers an access to other cultures (Wiersema, 2005). Accompanied by the practice in translating texts into and out of the target language, students can often first experience a foreign culture and get a better understanding of original materials (Kuhiwczak & Littau, 2007; Wechsler, 1998). Reading or studying translated books, articles or other materials also make it easy to remember enormous grammatical rules and numerous vocabulary lists. Furthermore, through a contrastive study of the target language with the native language, students are given an insight into the linguistic structure and linguistic phenomenon of two languages. Obviously, experiencing translation or reading translated texts does not only enrich one's mind, but also helps to develop a positive attitude towards the society and foreign cultures (Kuhiwczak & Littau, 2007).

Evidence has disclosed the necessity of using translation in the process of language teaching especially when concerning the meanings of words and phrases within the target languages (Kern, 2008). Given sometimes it is difficult to illustrate particular language phenomenon or clarify the language rules,

Mallol (2003) suggests that translating the meanings of the target language into the native language is a good way to help students better understand the target language, grasp the knowledge of the target language and memorize the relevant information easily and effectively. This could also make students clearly see the relationships between language usage and grammar within both languages, learn both two languages thoroughly, deepen their understandings of both cultures and enhance their knowledge of language structures (Mallol, 2003).

While translation as a meaningful and helpful means is widely used in ESL classrooms and creating benefits to language learners, some concerns were also raised by researchers (Luo, 2007; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). They suggest that translation should be limitedly used in the process of language acquisition because translation used as a teaching method reverses the language learning process (Luo, 2007; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Larsen-Freeman (2000, p. 44) claims that the natural order of learning a language should be “listening, speaking, reading and writing”, which is the way how children learn their native languages in natural surroundings. However, with little attention on speaking and listening, translation emphasizes the understanding of grammar and the illustrating and explaining of the meanings of target languages. This in return probably hampers the improvement of the practical abilities of the target language, especially speaking skills (Dash & Dash, 2007; Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

It can be seen that long-standing use of translation in ESL classrooms limits the proficiency of speaking skills. Linguistic researchers claim that using translation to teach another language fails to establish a direct link between thoughts and expressions in target languages (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Translation forces students to think and express their opinions in native languages instead of target languages and makes it difficult for those who want to give up the habit of organizing speeches in native languages and then translating ideas into foreign languages (Malmkjaer, 1998). As a result, language learners who are taught with this method often fail to express themselves effectively in target languages as well as to get proficiency in its actual application.

In addition, translation itself is limited because exact translation from one language into another language is almost impossible. Each language has its own structure, idiom and usage, which cannot be exactly translated into another language (Dash & Dash, 2007; Larson, 1998). A language is indeed a combination of various customs, traditions and modes of behaviors which differ from one community to another community. Therefore, literal translation or word-for-word translation sometimes ruins the exquisiteness of sentences in target languages or misrepresents the meanings of original works (Dash & Dash, 2007; Malakoff & Hakuta, 1991). Thus, translation should be considered as an index of one’s proficiency in a language.

Translation as an exercise involves various aspects including cultural backgrounds, individual comprehensions and language competency. These factors require translators not only to possess a profound knowledge of the source language to perceive the meaning in different contexts, but also to have the ability to recreate the messages in the target language precisely (Chan, 2004). Besides, translation also concerns linguistic, textual and social systems that are related to both languages and

cultures (House & Blum-Kulka, 1986). Therefore, language teachers should enrich their knowledge in both mother tongue and the target language as well as improve their language competence including translation skills to achieve an effective and successful language teaching objective.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Objectives and Questions of the Study**

This study aims to examine the merits and demerits of using translation ESL teaching and learning. It also seeks to find out how the language teachers and learners use translation to help understand various materials in the target language, as well as how they view translation used in their language teaching and learning practice. Besides, some pedagogical implications for ESL teachers and students will be discussed. It focuses on the following three questions:

1. In what situation is translation be applied in the process of ESL classes?
2. What are the main advantages and disadvantages of using translation in ESL classes?
3. What recommendations are provided for ESL teaching and learning in terms of translation as a teaching method?

### **Participants and methods**

This study was conducted within the Master of Education program at the University of Tasmania. It involved the participation of fifteen students from China, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, and Singapore who were studying in the TESOL program at the time of data collection. The TESOL program is developed to provide students with a sound theoretical foundation in English language, and help students develop teaching strategies and firmly ground in theory, research and practice. The main aim of this program is to develop students who are eligible to teach English as a second language internationally and capable to do research related to ESL teaching, learning or assessment. All participants with an Asian background in this study had experience in English learning and/or teaching. Semi-structured interviews and journal writing were conducted to reflect the participants' experiences in using translation as a strategy in the process of ESL teaching and learning.

### **Data collection and analysis**

The data were collected within a three-month period and in the forms of interview transcripts and participant's previous reflective journals on their teaching experience. The interviews were conducted during their studying in the TESOL program. Reflective journals all in English were collected in the last week of the data collection to further support the evidence. The data collected were analyzed using a

constructivist grounded theory approach and a three-step coding approach which includes the open, axial and selective coding stages (Sarantakos, 2005). The codes constructed in this study were related to how those TESOL students viewed translation as a strategy in the process of English teaching and learning. These codes were identified and labeled into four categories in the selective coding process and discussed in the following section.

## FINDINGS

In the last step of the coding process, the data were refined and reduced into four categories in relation to the views of TESOL students on translation as a teaching and learning method. The categories are introduced below. Pseudonyms are used in this paper to protect the participants' privacy.

### Category 1: Experiences in using translation in ESL classrooms (187 responses)

The first category emerged from the data analysis process was "Experiences in using translation in ESL classrooms". The significant number of codes in this category indicated that translation had been widely used in English language teaching and learning to help learners understand learning materials better. It was shown that in the data all participants had experiences in translation and most of them used translation very often in their previous teaching and current learning. They had benefited a lot from translation which not only aided in understanding the meanings of original messages, but also helped in developing an English thinking mode and enhancing the proficiency in the use of English. Doing text translation could also provide learners with a better understanding of sentence structures and western cultures as the texts contain various idioms and native expressions, such as "don't have a cow" which refers to "don't make a fuss" and "keep your shirt on" which means "calm down". Besides, those participants reported that they used translation mostly to preview and review textbooks. This was evidenced in the reflective journal of one participant who is from Malaysia:

*I remembered that...my English teacher often translated some difficulty English language points to help us achieve effective language learning when I was a student. We were also often promoted to use translation to especially preview upcoming texts and get the main meaning of new vocabulary in Chinese so that we could better grasp what the teacher would have taught in the class and receive new knowledge easily ... (Betty's Journal Entry)*

The participants also stated that translation is a flexible task, it could be shown in different ways or styles and thus it is hard to say which translation is the best. Due to the different knowledge backgrounds, views and understandings of cultures, different people could hardly arrive at the exact same translation for the same piece of the text. Sometimes the versions might be totally different because of the different usage of grammatical rules, sentence structures or expressions. Moreover, in equable translation levels, understanding levels and language knowledge may also influence the

translation quality. Although there may be no fixed standards to identify which translated version is better, those participants believed that any translation should be on the premise of properly converting the information, such as thoughts and arguments, from one language into another language. One of those participants, a former English teacher in Singapore, stated that during the interview:

*Actually, for one given translation exercise, students could present totally different translation versions, so do our language teachers. But I think it could be fine so long as the students can present the core meaning of original message in their mother tongue...Honestly speaking, I really don't think I can exactly convey the information that the target language passes. That is why I seldom used translation to explain something during my class before except for some really difficulty ones... Nevertheless, I have to admit that to some extent translation is helpful to increase students' language understanding... (Leo, February 6, 2010)*

However, when it comes to the satisfaction of the participants to their previous translated works, there showed different degrees of contentment with the use of translation in the process of English teaching and/or learning. Some participants thought that they felt good at translating, while others stated that they could not get the exact meaning of the target language but only getting the main idea of original materials and they often felt confused with some details. Also, some of them believed that whether a piece of text can be translated well depends on its contents. However, all the participants would like to use their native languages to help in their ESL teaching and/or learning and believed that translation did and does play an indispensable role in their ESL teaching and/or learning process in some measures.

## **Category 2: Significance of using translation in ESL classrooms (169 responses)**

The second category "Significance of using translation in ESL classrooms" had 169 responses. It indicated that translation serves as a useful and helpful tool in the language teaching and learning. According to the responses, using translation did not only save the time of explaining English with English, but also enhanced the understanding of various materials in the target language and helped to memorize vocabularies. With the help of translation, language learners, especially primary English learners could understand the meanings of English texts more easily and quickly. Moreover, those participants believed that translation could help language learners understand another culture and memorize idioms, phrases and some jargons more effectively. Some participants declared that they had benefited in many ways from doing various translation exercises such as in the richness of vocabulary and the depth of foreign cultures. One participant from Korea disclosed her high evaluation on translation during the interview:

*Of course, translation is useful and helpful for learning English since it can facilitate your understanding another language more easily and effectively. If you don't know the meaning of English words in your*

*own language, how do you memorize them and how to use them in right way? ...For me, I often used translation to check new words and phrases with my electronic dictionary, and it really deepened my understanding of those words and let me commit to memory. (Shim Changmin, February 4, 2010)*

Translation is also serving as a facilitator in the process of language teaching and communication with students. Some participants who had been English teachers in Asian contexts stated that translation did not only help in explaining and illustrating difficult English terms, slang and lexis, but also made it easy to communicate with their students. Using translation helped language learners understand English texts easily and effectively, which in return encouraged learners to ask and propose questions in their native language based on their understanding of what their teacher stressed in the class. In addition, through various translation exercises, English language teachers could receive feedback on how much their students grasped and understood what was taught during classes, thus improving their teaching approaches and teaching styles to achieve a better pedagogical objective.

### **Category 3: Necessity of using translation in the process of ESL (153 responses)**

The third category emerged from the data analysis process is “Necessity of using translation in the process of ESL”. According to the responses, it was very necessary to use translation in the process of language teaching to help students’ understanding of English textbooks. In the primary or high schools, in particular, teachers needed to translate English texts into the mother tongue to facilitate English teaching and learning process so that students get better known of the knowledge of English. Also when explaining the grammatical rules or the meanings of new words and sentences, English teachers would like to use the native language and translate the original work into their native languages to help students memorize the relevant knowledge easily. In addition, it was also considered as necessary to ask students to do some translation exercises according to language teachers’ explanation of the texts in order to check students’ understanding of relevant knowledge. This was evidenced in a Japanese student’s reflective journal:

*...as an English teacher in the primary school, I admitted that translation has done a great favor in my ESL teaching, which not only helped my students know what I conveyed, but also better understood their textbooks and some difficult expressions in English. Besides, I allowed them to propose some questions about the English language points in their mother tongue so that I could get feedback from them on their study and understanding ...indeed, almost all my colleagues in my school tend to use translation in their English classes to help students understands the target language... (Hero’s Journal Entry)*

On the other hand, some participants stated that it is absolutely essential to translate the original work into the native language when they preview and review the textbooks, especially involving new words,

phrases and complicated sentence structures. Also, in order to read fast and get the main ideas of given English materials, they would like to turn to an upsurge of various electronic dictionaries or online tools to translate relevant messages. Besides, some participants reported that they tended to use translation in English writing. They often first arrived at an outline in their own language and then translated those ideas into English. But they found that it is hard to find appropriate words sometimes to exactly express their ideas since one English word may carry more than one meaning, sometimes four or five meanings. Moreover, several English words are presenting the same meaning in their own mother tongue. As a result, they often failed to convey their ideas and opinions correctly or academically in writing. The following interview transcription indicated the confusion of one student from China:

*I use translation in my English language learning very often, even in my English essay.... But sometimes, I felt confused and I didn't know how to express what I think in English even though I have found out many English words related to it. There are so many English words to express one Chinese meaning that I don't know which one is the most suitable... in fact, I can translate English into Chinese with Chinese style, but it is hard for me to translate my words, or others into English in English style. (Tina, February 13, 2010)*

#### **Category 4: Limitation of using translation in the process of language acquisition (57 responses)**

Although most participants highly valued translation as a teaching and learning method in TESOL classrooms, the limitations were also mentioned in this study. The most obvious one was that translation sometimes failed to retain authentic style of original materials and made it difficult to understand. The participants reported that some of their previous teachers could not translate texts or sentences correctly or even distorted the meanings of original texts. The mistranslated texts made them confused and misunderstood. Some of them with ESL teaching experiences also stated that sometimes they couldn't make their native languages exactly convey the meanings of the target language and thus limiting the use of translation during classes. It is admitted that if a teacher always used translation to teach English in ESL classrooms, students would feel bored and loss interest and enthusiasm in ESL learning. In addition, it is agreed that a language learner could not learn the target language well if he/she always depends on translation because translation hampers the development in the way of thinking in the target language and fails to provide chances of practicing their speaking skills.

It was also reported that some certain words and ways of expressions in one language might have no equivalences in the other language. Hence, it was very difficult to translate them into or out of the target language. For example, the primary meaning of the English word "table" does not fit in such expressions as "table of freight charges", "table of contents", "table of figures", "time table" or "table

balance". Although sometimes people use similar words to explain something in the other language, it does not help much with understanding of original texts. Moreover, due to the differences in various cultures and the ways of expression between western and eastern countries, some translation works would be totally wrong and often raised a laugh. Some common Chinese-to-English translation sentences were given by those Chinese participants:

*"Good good study, day day up." (It is from a Chinese saying which actually means 'Study hard in order to make a great progress', but translated by a pile of English words organized together according to the Chinese words and Chinese grammar.)*

*"You me you me" (It actually means 'We are alike', but translated literally in Chinese way and style.)*

*"Go past no mistake past" (it is also a word-for-word translation in accordance with Chinese grammar, which really refers to 'don't miss when you pass by')*

## DISCUSSION

From the categories emerged from data analysis it can be seen that translation has been widely used as a significant tool by both language teachers and students in the process of ESL teaching and learning. Not only do ESL teachers use translation to represent the meanings of English materials, explain specific terms and elucidate the relevant knowledge more easily and clearly, ESL learners also make use of translation to preview or review English texts in different contexts and to enhance the language learning effectiveness (Mallol, 2003). Through translation, language teachers and learners both have access to intercultural experiences which can enrich their minds and broaden their horizons (Kuhiwczak & Littau, 2007). Additionally, the generation of a satisfactory translation into or out of the target language also contributes to the development of student's sensitivity to the meanings of two languages. Through a comparative examination of the semantic and syntactic systems of the source and target languages and the cultural contexts in which they conduct, students may make an effort to increase their own potential for expressing the ideas in the target language (Zhong, 1983).

It has been shown that translation is a helpful part of collaborative and individual strategy to assist in understanding and comprehending another language easily and effectively. Zhong (1983) asserts that the mother tongue plays a role in creating conveniences for both teachers and students and also makes the communication between teachers and students more effectively as the students can use the native language to answer and propose some questions related to the target language. Hence translation can be a way of better learning another language and an exercise to better comprehend the knowledge of the target language (Kuhiwczak & Littau, 2007; Wechsler, 1998). Moreover, the second language proficiency directly associates with the first language proficiency so that language learners' proficiency in their mother tongues can support and accelerate their language learning. Therefore, it is suggested

that language teachers should take advantage of their own language rather than separating it from the target language when inculcating the students during classes (Luo, 2007).

Another considerable finding disclosed the necessity of using translation in ESL teaching and learning for some particular contexts. The most obvious one is that when illustrating particular language phenomenon or clarifying the language rules, language teachers may apply translation to assist students in understanding and memorizing the knowledge of the target language easily and effectively (Mallol, 2003). Through the translation, the students can clearly see the relationships between two languages and thus deepening their understandings of relevant knowledge of the target language. At the same time, language learners could be provided more opportunities to read various translated articles, grasp enormous grammatical rules and massive vocabulary lists, and to experience different cultural elements (Coady & Huckin, 1997). Because of the convenience and efficacy, translation is valued as an excellent way to gain a rapid understanding of the target language especially as for the systematic study of grammar (Hinton & Hale, 2001).

While translation creates conveniences and benefits to both language teachers and learners in the process of ESL teaching and learning, it may also lead to difficulties from some aspects. According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), translation hampers the improvement of students' speaking skills because of its emphasis on the understanding of grammatical rules and the meanings of the target language. It is believed that the long-standing use of translation probably stops language learners from thinking and conveying their ideas and thoughts in the target language, and also increases the difficulties in the development of thinking styles in the target language (Malmkjaer, 1998). Consequently, language learners fail to get proficiency in the use of the target language, especially when it comes to speaking and listening.

Honestly speaking, exact translation is impossible since each language has its own structure, idiom and usage, which cannot be exactly translated into another language (Dash & Dash, 2007; Larson, 1998). As a language is the result of various customs, traditions, and modes of behaviors different from one community to another community, translation process not only involves the ability to set standards and make judgments, but also requires the capacity to understand both two cultures and languages (Yildiz & Ögeyik 2008). If one does not have enough knowledge related to the target language or not proficient in the two languages, he/she could not arrive at a good translation work. And incorrect translated sentences sometimes may either ruin the exquisiteness of the messages in the target language or misrepresent the meaning of original works (Dash & Dash, 2007; Malakoff & Hakuta, 1991). Therefore, without the consideration of language characteristics resulting from cultural factors, uncritical use of translation will consistently make language learners fail to formulate in their minds an existent relationship between English and their mother tongue. It may also give learners inadequate, perplexing or even incorrect information about the target language.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

As long-standing use of translation may fail to provide enough opportunities for language students to reflect and convey their ideas in the target language, it is recommended that in this study translation should be limitedly used in ESL classrooms although it is viewed as a facilitator in English language teaching and learning. ESL teachers need to teach the students in English and use translation only for explaining very difficult English terms or expressions. Besides, since translation involves various aspects such as cultural backgrounds, individual comprehensions and language competence which contribute to more precise and faithful translation works in the other language, it is stated that translation exercise is suitable for those who have a certain ability of the use of two languages to some extent. Hence, a good language teacher should enrich his/her knowledge of both the source language and the target language and have the ability to perceive the meanings in different contexts (Chan, 2004). What is more, a capable language teacher needs to deliver certain linguistic knowledge as well as translating strategies to language learners so that they can effectively use translation in and out of class.

## CONCLUSION

Obviously, translation as a teaching method has had a profound effect on the second language methodology, leaving an indelible mark on language teaching and learning. Translation as a teaching tool not only helps students better appreciate and learn foreign cultures, but also assists students to deeply understand the structure of foreign languages as well as the relationship between the two languages. Moreover, the production of a successful translation also contributes to the development of student's sensitivity to the meanings of two languages. However, while the use of translation in the ESL classroom creates numerous benefits to language learners, it may also directly or indirectly result in some problems such as hampering the development of oracy, changing the style of original materials, or reducing students' motivation. Therefore, it is recommended that ESL teachers and students should limit the use of translation in the process of their ESL teaching and learning and ESL teachers need to enrich their knowledge in various aspects and develop their skills in the use of the native language and the target language.

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