

## The Use of Transition Notes in Learning English & Translation

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Transactional language has an important role to play in education and in life in general. Across the curriculum, it is the language of the classroom, the language of textbooks, and the language of examinations. Further, as pointed out by McEldowney (1994: 3), it is the type of language with which the community at large conducts day-to-day business. Therefore, a sound knowledge of such language develops awareness of a norm from which literary text deviates in order to make a special impact.

The starting point should be the "norm" represented by the transactional texts. Furthermore, beginning with more predictable transactional text will enable those learners who come to translation before they are completely fluent in English to improve their English reading skills in preparation for dealing with the greater complexities of literary texts. For students learning to translate, such texts provide better basis for learning how to improve the quality of their output while at the same time preserving as much as possible of the original information contained in the source text.

Because translating is a process of interpreting text, the hypothesis here is that the starting point should be the "norm" represented by the transactional texts. The grammatical framework represented by these texts is predictable, and there is consensus in the understanding of the meaning. Furthermore, such text is culturally neutral. Social and literary language cannot be severed from cultural manipulation which goes far beyond the factual meaning of the language involved.

Once we have made the choice to begin with transactional language, we need to proceed in a structured manner if our learners are to communicate effectively in both spoken and written modes within the three communicative purposes, i.e., instruction, narration, and description, and if our learners are successfully to transfer the ideas expressed in one language into another language. In this respect, we need to consider the three interrelated points of grading, the sub-purposes within a main communicative purpose, and the mix of communicative purposes.

For successful learning we need to establish a basic "core" form of language (as referred to below) which represents a level of minimum competence. From this core we develop more and more sophisticated levels of expression. For instance, Text 1a can be considered grammatically the "core" version of the basic information involved in Text 1.

### Text 1.

*Mix all the ingredients in the bowl. Use the knife to cut up the butter, then knead with your fingers until the flour and sugar are blended into the butter and the mixture is sticky.*

*Tip the mixture out in front of you. Flatten it about 1 cm thick. You may need to put flour on the work surface to keep the mixture from sticking. Use the cutter to make biscuits, and lay them on the baking tray. Make sure that their edges do not touch.*

*Bake the biscuits at Gas Mark 4/250° F/120° C for about 20 minutes or until light brown. When you take them out of the oven, use a cloth or oven glove and place the tray on a wooden board so that the tray does not burn the work surface. (Vorderman, 1997:57)*

### Text 1a (Core Instruction)

*Mix the ingredients. Cut up butter. Knead mixture. Tip out mixture. Flatten. Cut out some biscuits. Bake biscuits.*

Each of the sentences here are of the VO type and, according to McEldowney's definition of core (ibid), each sentence element contains only one piece of information. As a result, the number of vocabulary items to be dealt with is limited. The six steps of the original are expressed in the core version, but all additional information has been stripped from the skeleton.

Adverbial information could be added to each sentence above to produce sentences of the VOA type so extending the range of lexis involved. If each adverbial similarly contains only one piece of information we would still have a core version though there is an additional sentence component to increase the degree of complexity even at this level:

## Text 1b

*Mix the ingredients in a bowl. Cut up the butter with a knife. Knead the mixture with your fingers. Tip up the mixture in front of you. Flatten it to 1 cm thick. Make biscuits with a cutter. Put them on a tray. Bake the biscuits for 20 minutes. Take the tray out of the oven. Place it on a board*

We note the relatively more sophisticated sentence structure represented by *Use the knife to cut up the butter* has been reduced to *Cut up the butter with a knife*.

The advice in the source text expressed by *You may need to put flour on the work surface to keep the mixture from sticking* and *make sure that their edges do not touch* represent a level of sophistication greater than the versions just illustrated. They are much more grammatically complex and provide an example of two types of instruction being combined together. In the early stages of writing, learners might be encouraged to produce parallel forms like *make sure their edges do not touch* and *make sure the mixture does not stick*.

A further element of sophistication in the source text is represented by the descriptive element embedded into adverbial clauses (*Knead the mixture*) *until the flour and the sugar are blended into the butter and the mixture is sticky* and (*Place the tray on a wooden board*) *so that the tray does not burn the work surface*. These forms provide more advice of the type referred to in the previous paragraph. They might be expressed in the form *Make sure the flour and sugar blend into the butter* and *Make sure the tray does not burn the work surface*. At the level at which they might be added to the learner's output we might then find:

## Text 1c

*Mix the ingredients in a bowl. Cut up the butter with a knife. Knead the mixture with your fingers. Make sure the flour and sugar blend with the butter and make sure the mixture is sticky. Tip out the mixture in front of you. Flatten it to 1 cm thick. Make sure the mixture does not stick. Make biscuits with a cutter. Put them on a tray. Make sure the edges do not touch. Bake the biscuits for 20 minutes. Take the tray out of the oven. Place it on a board. Make sure the work surface does not burn.*

In the same way with regard to narrative and descriptive, texts can show core versions of the source texts. A core narrative, for instance, can show the narrative sequence of the source and each sentence element has only one piece of information.

### Text 2a

*Some Chinese arrived at dawn. The bishop went with them. He tended the wounded.*

As we saw in the case of instructions, we can add greater complexity even at the core level by including additional sentence components, each of which contains only one piece of information.

### Text 2b

*The Chinese arrived at the mission at dawn. The bishop went with them to the hospital. He tended to the wounded with his medicines.*

More information is carried in descriptive comments in *Text 2d* providing a higher level of textual complexity.

### Text 2c

*The Chinese arrived at the mission at dawn. They were armed. The bishop had some medicines. The Chinese wanted his help. The bishop trusted them. He went to the hospital. He tended the wounded. They were 13 or 14.*

We note that this descriptive information provides the reasons for the events in the basic narrative sequence. The original text, however, provides a higher level of textuality.

### Text 2

*At about seven o'clock, just after dawn, a strange deputation arrived at the mission compound. They were Chinese armed to the teeth, on a mission of mercy. They knew the Bishop had some medicines and they begged him to go with them to the hospital, where some thirteen or fourteen Chinese lay wounded. The Bishop decided to trust them, went to the hospital, and tended the wounded. (Payne, 1960:91)*

Let us turn now to descriptive information about guinea pigs.

### Text 3

*The correct name given for a guinea pig is cavy. The more smooth-haired kinds are best for beginners to keep. Cavies like raised cages similar to rabbit*

*hutches, with hay for sleeping. They eat little and often: fresh greens, turnips, apple peel, bread and special mix from the pet shop. In summer they can crop the grass in the garden but enclose and protect them. They like a hot bran mash meal at night in winter, but do not let them get fat. They need plenty of water, changed each day, from a large water bottle. If cared for, a cavy can live for up to eight years. (Hamlyn, 1985:117)*

A simpler version of the stative description might read something like:

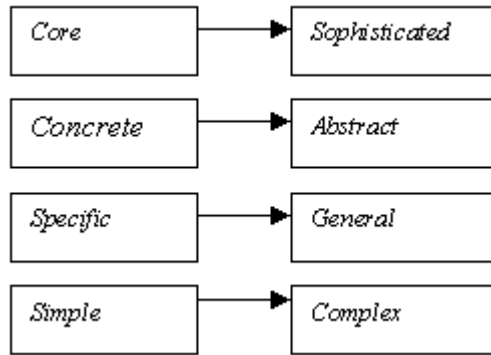
### Text 3a

*Guinea pigs are called cavies. Some are smooth-haired. These are hardy. They eat little. They eat greens, carrots, turnips, apple peel, and bread. In summer they crop grass. In winter they like bran each night. They need water. They live up to 8 years.*

As we shall see below in our discussion of an appropriate methodology, core versions like those illustrated above can be produced by our learners from tasks related to original source texts. We have seen above how complexity can develop even at the core level by, for instance, adding further sentence components and by putting two communicative purposes together. As we move on further in a systematic manner, the level of complexity required from our learners will depend on their ability and stage of learning in an overall move from core to more and more sophisticated ways of communicating textual information.

We note, further, that the example of description represented by the information about guinea pigs is a generalisation. Such descriptions should be preceded by specific description in learning terms. For instance, information about individual examples of items like a range of different pencils, cars, or different houses must precede a generalisation about pencils, cars, or houses, that integrates the common features of the class. So, for instance, there is one-to-one match between words and example in the real world in something like *This pencil is red. It is wooden. It contains lead. It is 2 inches long* or *This pencil is green. It is plastic. It contains lead. It is 4 inches long.* And so on. It is only after the conceptual and linguistic mastery of such expressions that the learner can move on to the generalisation which is an abstraction of all pencils in the world and which will be grammatically more sophisticated: *Pencils are made of different materials. They may be wooden, plastic, silver, or gold. They are of different colours. Some are of fixed length while others are made of wood that can be sharpened and so reduced in length. They all contain lead.*

Thus it would seem that textual material should develop on the basis of several dichotomies:



This suggests the following development with regard to communicative purpose:

Specific instruction

Specific description

General instruction

General description

Narration

At suitable stages in this development two purposes might be mixed. So, for instance, once a learner is in control of specific instructions and specific description, the two might be combined. Thus, a sequence of instructions for making a specific item might be followed by a paragraph describing the finished product.

## Methodology

It is assumed here that, if language learning is to take place, there must be some data available to the learner to work with, and the type of predictable language referred to above is seen to provide for this need. The aim is to equip the learner with the listening and reading skills necessary for independent acquisition of information from a wide range of appropriate sources and with the speaking and writing skills necessary for the expression and discussion of ideas. As already indicated, in the early stages the learning of translation can most effectively be entwined with this process. At later stages, the two processes will divert and move along somewhat separate paths.

A start in teaching translation needs to be made with a source or input text to process. Whether spoken or written, text has the purpose of communicating some type of message. Human communication is characterised by a natural desire for information. This innate interest in knowledge can be used to drive learners on to

accumulate as well as impart knowledge to others. Thus, exposure to language can be seen as the trigger which activates the learner.

Pedagogically, content should be used to provide a mental need for interaction employing appropriate language structure. In the communication of information, the ultimate aim of language learning is to achieve a direct shift from input to output information in the same language without the use of intermediaries of any kind while that of translation is to achieve a similar shift. With regard to translation, however, information received in one language is encoded into another. Towards such an end, learners need to build up an adequate store of linguistic and real world information. This can be achieved through a process of working through listening and reading material from a wide range of sources and, as they go, learners need constantly to practice recycling information by *initiating their own communication from information received in the target language* (McEldowney, 1990:13).

The process of recycling just referred to depends mainly on using a catalyst of summary notes that distil the linguistic forms and arrangements of concepts.

### Transition Notes

Transition notes *represent a distillation of the linguistic features and discourse organisation of a given text* (ibid. 1990:24). They guide the learners cognitively as well as linguistically. Initially, guided comprehension tasks help learners to make notes from a source text. As learning progresses the control becomes less and less until learners can make their own notes without help. Once notes have been developed they become the basis for the learner's output both spoken and written.

Let us see what transition notes for Text 1 might look like for what might be considered as an intermediate level of learning.

Mix	your ingredients	in a bowl		
Cut up	the butter		with a knife	
Blend	the flour & sugar	into the butter	with your fingers	
Put	some flour	on the work surface		
Tip out	the mixture			
Flatten	it			
Make	some biscuits		with a cutter	
Lay	them	on a baking tray		
Set	the oven		to Gas Mark 4	
Bake	the biscuits			for 20 minutes
Take	them	out of the oven	with a cloth	
Place	the tray	on a board		

In the first column we note the sequence of steps involved represented by the stem (imperative) form of the verb. The second column represents "what" or the sentence object. The remaining columns represent adverbial elements of one type or another. Depending on the level of the learner, the adverbials might all be listed on one column or, as here, each type of adverbial might have its own column - "where", "instrument", "limit", "duration". Reading down the notes reveals the main sequence of steps involved while reading across reveals the elements in each sentence - VO, VOA or VOAA. As indicated with regard to the discussion of "core" versions of the information above, the amount of detail included in the notes will depend on the level of the learners.

We note that such notes allow for the control of the rather complex web of determiner and pronominal reference in English, something which is somewhat different in a language like Arabic. In the notes above we note that first reference is marked, as appropriate, by *your* or *some*. Reference back is then marked by *the*. *It* and *them* refer to singular and plural referents respectively.

Text 2 which also centres around a sequence of events would also be controlled by a column of dynamic verbs in the appropriate form.

Some Chinese	arrived			at the mission	at dawn
They	asked	the bishop	to go with them		
He	went			to the hospital	with them
He	tended	the wounded			

Here, as with the instructions, the sequence is revealed on the y-axis and individual sentence structure on the x-axis. Referential usage is controlled in the way suggested with regard to Text 1.

If descriptive information were added, the notes might look like this:

Some Chinese	arrived			at the mission	at dawn	[armed]
They	asked	the bishop	to go with them			[some medicines]
He	went			to the hospital	with them	
He	tended	the wounded				[fourteen Chinese]

We note that in the case of description the verbs do not carry the central meaning in the way of instructive and narrative sequence. For this reason the notes pick out the central concept words. Reconstructing these notes would produce something like *Some Chinese arrived at the mission at dawn. They were armed. They asked the bishop to go with them. he had some medicines* and so on.

In the case of Text 3, a stative description, the notes would centre around the concepts expressed rather than around a sequence of verbs or a sequence of steps. That is, information is tabulated rather than providing what is basically a flow chart of events. If the bulk of information is retrieved, the tabulation would perhaps have two columns:

<b>Guinea pigs</b>	
<b>Correct name</b>	Cavies
<b>Purpose</b>	Pets
<b>Suitable type</b>	Hardy smoothed-haired
<b>Cages*</b>	Raised
<b>Feeding</b>	Little often
<b>Basic food</b>	Greens, carrots Turnips apple peel bread a special mix
<b>Summer food</b>	Grass
<b>Winter food</b>	Bran
<b>Water</b>	Plenty Fresh
<b>Life expectancy</b>	8 years

The \* is used here to signal the use of *should* bein the descriptive sentence as will be discussed later when we indicate how to use the notes in the classroom.

The information in each cell allows for the reconstruction of an appropriate descriptive sentence - *Guinea pigs are called cavies. They make pets. A suitable type is hardy and smoothed-haired. Their cages should be raised. They contain hay. They eat little and often* and so on. We note that further columns could be added to such a table for further practice. So, for instance, another column might be headed *rabbits*

and another *gerbils*. Learners would then need to carry a library search to complete each cell with appropriate information.

### Classroom use

In their preparation, once teachers have developed transition notes, they need to develop appropriate tasks for classroom use. For instance, with regard to instructions, the teacher needs to lead the class to identify the sequence of imperative verbs as the central carrier of meaning in the source text. In the early stages of learning the teacher might provide the verbs in jumbled order and then ask the learners to read (or listen to) the text and number the steps in the order they need to be carried out. Once learners have some experience they might be asked merely to identify the steps and list the verbs involved. Once learners have identified the steps, they can provide the teacher with the necessary information to list the steps on the chalkboard, whiteboard or OHP. The same process is carried out with the "whats", the "wheres" the "instruments" and so on until the transition notes have been completed and written where the whole class can see them. Thus, without worrying too much about meaning, learners have been encouraged to identify in a systematic way the linguistic categories appropriate to developing instructive sentences. At this stage McEldowney (1996/7:a 5) suggests that language learners might, following the model provided by the teacher, use the notes to practise the music of the language by orally constructing the sentences. The reconstructed instructions will be simpler in form than the source text in the way outlined above. This activity will also provide preparation for later writing up of the instructions.

After such tasks which help build up linguistic awareness and prosodic skill, the teacher will need to turn to meaning. This might involve, initially, some speculation about the meaning of any words that are perhaps unfamiliar but, before recourse to dictionaries, learners might be presented with a set of visuals in which the steps are in random order. They would then be asked to label *some sugar, some flour, some butter, ingredients, the mixture, a bowl, the work surface* and the like. At this point, unfamiliar words may be speculated upon in a trial and error manner.

After work with the ingredients and apparatus to be used in the recipe, attention should turn to the sequence of steps. In this case the teacher might ask the learners to find a suitable imperative verb for each diagram in the sequence. Finally, the learners will be asked to put the diagram in the correct order for carrying out instructions.

Once this has been achieved, the labelled diagram can be used for the learners to outline the steps orally and then to write up instructions they have thus rehearsed. At this point mono-lingual dictionaries might be used to confirm any meanings that learners still feel insecure about.

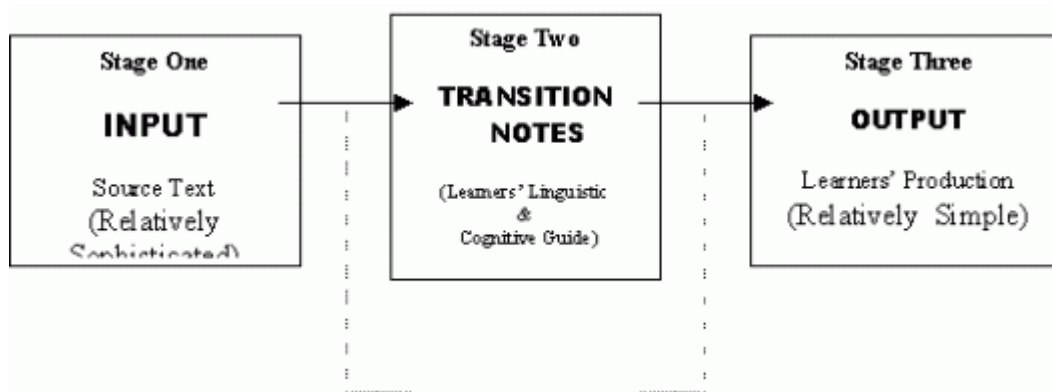
A similar process will be carried out with regard to narrative. Learners will build up transition notes by identifying the sequence of past tense verbs, the sentence

subjects, objects and adverbials. Then, after spoken rehearsal, they might label and order a series of narrative pictures presented out of order. These will then be the basis for further spoken rehearsal for the writing of the story.

With regard to stative description, learners might be presented with a table to fill in. This table will then be the basis for spoken practice. Here a teacher might want to alert learners to the use of a particular structure within the context. For instance, in the example above we suggested that the use of an asterisk might remind learners to use a construction with *should*. Such practice might be followed by work on identifying, from appropriate drawings, a smooth-haired guinea pig, an appropriate raised cage filled with hay and the like. The table then provides the stimulus for written production.

## Conclusion

In this way, learners develop the skills of comprehension and production around a specific piece of information. Rather than discussing the meaning of unfamiliar words at the beginning of the session, meaning is allowed to develop as activities progress. This means that learners are more likely to develop the skill of inferring meaning from context and thus a better overall textual awareness. They will not feel insecure when they come across unfamiliar items and feel over-faced with the task. The process can be one of analysing and synthesising in a move to discover the maximum meaning appropriate to the level of learning involved. A source text is analysed to produce transition notes and a final synthesis results in the production of a piece of cohesive text. This process can be summarised thus:



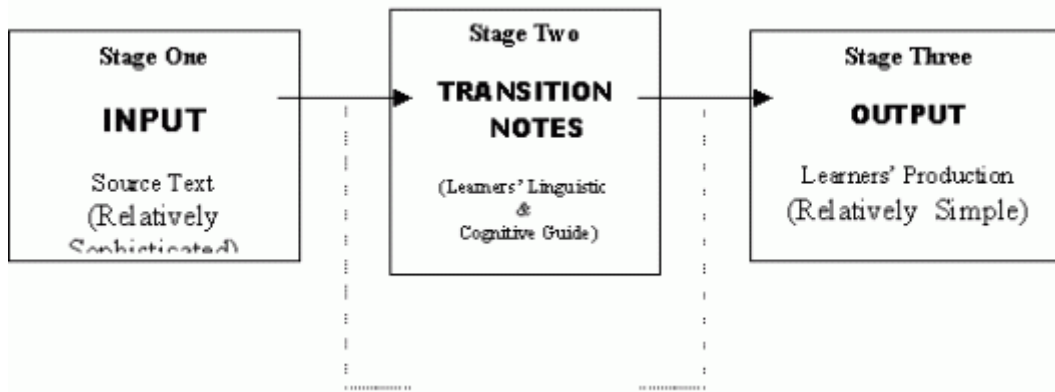
## Learning Tasks

For language learners the information cycle stops at this point and learning proceeds with exposure to more and more input texts at increasing levels of difficulty and with less and less teacher control, the aim being to equip the learner to manipulate

information as independently as possible. In learning to translate, however, a further dimension needs to be added to the information cycle outlined above.

## Translation

In learning to translate, Stage Two B and Stage Three B need to be added:



Thus, learners recycle the information from the source text (in this case English) in order to improve their comprehension and productive skills in this additional language and to create an awareness of the central features of the source text. They then develop transition notes in the target language, which show the organisation and grammatical markers appropriate to expressing the information of the source text in the target language. After oral rehearsal this is then used to produce a text in the source language. This process, it is argued, will lead to an accurate translation with minimum information loss or the inclusion of excess information.

The use of transition notes in the way suggested is more likely to control the tendency of learners to try for a word-for-word translation. The shift from one language to another in the way described throws the emphasis on context rather than individual vocabulary items. Further, as they are working from notes rather than text, learners are more likely to produce an Arabic text which is coherent in Arabic as they inflate the notes to formulate text.

Working towards this aim by beginning with transactional text will ensure a central aim in education. An information cycle which enables learners to gather textual information through the exercise of their listening and reading skills and to reproduce it in spoken and written mode, first in the source language and then in the target language, can be controlled through the development of transition notes. The notes provide a "map" of appropriate linguistic form and textual meaning for the learner. The goal is for learners to develop independence in the use of this cycle as quickly as possible.

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