

# **TEACHING TIPS**

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## **Teaching Tip 17: Translating**

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*How to avoid doing it:*

1. Refuse to give translations for new vocabulary yourself. Pretend/Admit you don't speak the student's language.
2. Encourage the students to guess the meaning of words they don't know or to ask each other for help or to look it up in a monolingual dictionary instead. (See TT6 , TT9 and TT20 for further explanation).
3. Explain that you are a teacher, not an interpreter.
4. Remind students that you are a teacher, not a dictionary.

*Why to avoid doing it:*

1. If student's translate words and you don't speak their language you won't know if they've really understood or if they've translated it correctly.
2. There often isn't a direct translation for a word or phrase, there is only an 'equivalent', sometimes not even that. Try translating a couple of modal verbs (like 'must' or 'would' and you'll see what I mean) and I doubt very much that there is a translation for 'Yorkshire Pudding' in any language (because it's something solely British so other countries will presumably never have needed a word for it). 'get' is hard to translate, as are phrasal verbs.
3. Translating some things word for word doesn't help. For example: My mother -in-law once told me that my husband is a 'pezzo di pane' which translates as 'a piece of bread'. I was none the wiser for having translated this. Did it mean he was soft, I asked myself? Or stale? (It actually means he's a good sort, apparently).
4. Translating slows students down which means you run the risk of getting bogged down in the fruitless pursuit of a word which isn't English anyway.
5. Thinking in two languages simultaneously (which is necessary for translating) is very hard. People pay simultaneous interpreters quite a lot of money to do this and you need to be very good at both languages to do it successfully. ('If you are a professional interpreter you may translate in my lessons, no problem' - funnily enough I haven't come across any such students yet!)
6. False friends can cause problems. In Italian the word 'sensibile' means sensitive. Not sensible. The word 'conveniente' means cheap. Not convenient. I could go on...
7. Often there is only one word in the students' language to translate two English words. For example: the Italian for make is 'fare' and so is the Italian for 'do'. The Italian for 'job' is 'lavoro' and so the Italian for 'work'. In such cases translating is actually the origin of the students' confusion over the words, not the solution to it.

*Extra info:*

If I encounter students who are convinced that translating English into their own language is an essential part of learning English I try to discourage them by explaining like this:

Let's imagine that I am a piano-teacher and a student wants to learn to play the piano so s/he has piano lessons with me. S/he may not be able to play the piano but s/he is an expert guitarist and brings his/her guitar to the lesson. I play a tune on the piano and s/he tries to copy it on the guitar. But it doesn't sound the same. In fact it doesn't sound like a piano at all. Well, it wouldn't, would it?

I suggest that s/he tries playing it on the piano but s/he tells me that s/he will only be able to play it on the piano if s/he can play it on the guitar first. The lesson continues with me playing the piano and the student 'translating' the tunes onto the guitar. At the end of this course of piano lessons, do you think the student will be able to play the piano? I think not.

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