

Case Study 4

Two year six Turkish-speaking boys, one has been educated in England since Y2 and is a confident user of English (L4) the other has only been in England for about 18 months and is just beginning to use English comfortably. (L2 reading, speaking & listening, L1 (secure) writing). Both communicate at home exclusively in Turkish.

One is under-performing in science tests, due to shaky grasp of key science vocab, the other needs a lot of support to understand the concepts in English.

Class activity was to complete a science test on the subject of materials. In silence...

Task for the boys was to use online translation to clarify their understanding of associated vocabulary. Working together with a copy of the test, they attempted to translate the questions into Turkish and then, after discussing the answer, to write it in Turkish and translate the result back into English.

We used InterTran. It was easy to understand and both boys were very comfortable using it. They particularly liked the drop-down menu which provided plausible alternatives for many of the words/phrases they wanted to use.

However, there were a number of problems which meant that progress was extremely slow.

- 1 Quality of English in the science test itself. On closer examination, the questions were vague, clearly designed to elicit specific, formulaic answers, and not couched in good English.
- 2 The translation device needed a simple sentence structure.
- 3 Verb forms (modals, continuous past/present) were difficult, sometimes impossible to translate.
- 4 Specialist vocabulary and scientific terminology did not translate.
- 5 'Woolly' words, such as 'did', 'got' 'some' could not be confidently translated.

The results were interesting. It was impossible to type in a phrase from the question and get a direct translation, however, this made the boys look more closely at the English words used in the question and helped them to clarify which ones they understood clearly, which vaguely and which not at all.

They needed an adult with an advanced understanding of English to be able to re-word the questions, sometimes several times, into a format that InterTran understood and could work with. Even then, some of the choices were ludicrous ('donkey' instead of 'is' for example!)

The drop-down menu gave rise to a huge amount of debate in Turkish about the precise meaning of specific words (various possibilities for 'strong') before the boys selected one to use. This also highlighted the non-specific nature of the word in English and helped them to see why they were having difficulties using it.

What about accents? The boys didn't seem to feel the need to use them when writing in Turkish – would this have made a difference to the overall effectiveness of the translation? One of the biggest problems for me was trying to work out how to

make the activity more effective without having any idea at all about how the Turkish language actually works!

The site was extremely slow and each request had to be sent several times (5+) before being translated. Endless messages stating that the site was too busy to handle the request made the whole exercise very time-consuming and frustrating for all of us.

Recommendations:

- A dictionary would have been extremely useful – both Turkish/English and Turkish - as the boys tried to clarify the meanings of similar words to their own satisfaction.
- Some knowledge of the basic structure of the language being translated so that you can work around problems.
- Time in advance of the session to look carefully at the language to be translated and re-formulate it into small, unambiguous chunks of meaning.

In the end the exercise was abandoned – we managed to ask and answer only 3/20 questions successfully, both because the questions were untranslatable, and due to lack of time. However the boys benefited from the session in a variety of ways. They both had a much clearer understanding of the science material we had managed to translate – not because of the effectiveness of the translation, but because of the amount of time and energy they invested in discussing precise meanings of words in both English and Turkish. They also focussed on some of the 'woolly' words in English mentioned above and having that discussion in Turkish has improved their ability to use the vocabulary more effectively in subjects other than science.

Interestingly, both boys have continued to use the discussion method in their wider learning, without any encouragement from staff, and even when they are working in different ability groups on separate tasks. Presumably this is because they have found the exercise beneficial, even though the translation activity itself was unsuccessful. Neither expressed any desire to use the translation engine again for other tasks. They both agreed that "It's too slow. It doesn't make sense. I'll ask my friend to help me – it's better!"