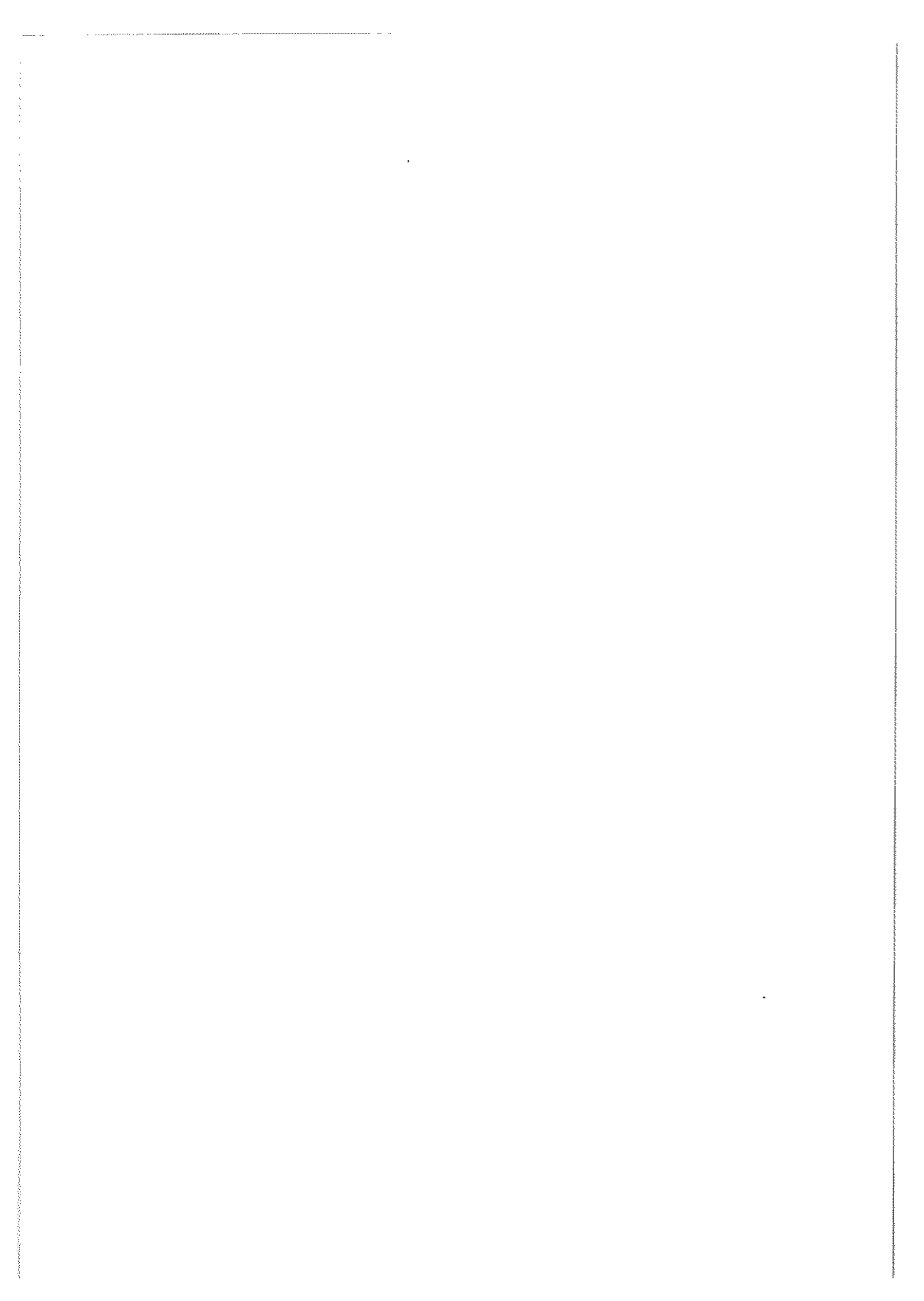


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**TRANSLATION AS READING:
A PATHOLOGY OF SCIENTISTS**

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INTRODUCTION

I have always been quite surprised, almost taken aback, when I have always received the same answer from students -all scientific people- of ESP Courses about the aim of the Course in question. This answer has always been: **"we want to learn how to translate English into Spanish"**

First of all let me remind you that the initials ESP¹ stand for English for Specific Purposes which in Spanish make reference to "cursos de inglés para finalidades específicas" (IFE).

As you can see in figure number 1 of the appendix, at the end of the article, my starting point to this reflection on matters of teaching the English language is the answer to a needs analysis questionnaire given by the students themselves in a context of a teaching-learning situation of English in special scientific field such as medicine, biology, business, and so on.

My amazement can be explained by the fact that not only do these people not understand oral English or read written English, but also by the thought that their knowledge of the Spanish language, although having a normal linguistic competence of a native person, completely lacks a teaching/training period on the linguistic skill of translation, which, in my view, is absolutely necessary and essential to reach the aim they are daring to propose in those ESP Courses.

At any rate, the only possible explanation that could justify this common and irritating phenomenon is that the term **"translation"** is

1.- With reference to ESP confer any of the following works:

HUTCHINSON and WATERS, *English for Specific Purposes*, CUP, 1987

MACKAY and MOUNTFORD (eds.) *English for Specific Purposes*, Longman (1978), 1979.

McDONOUGH, J., *ESP in Perspective. A practical Guide*, Collins, 1984.

ROBINSON, R., *ESP*, Pergamon Press, 1980.

SWALES, J., *Episodes in ESP*, Pergamon P. 1985.

taken by them to be equivalent to "reading comprehension". See figure nº. 2.

I would like to point out before proceeding in my argument that, to me, translation² signifies one of the most difficult, serious and latter phases of study in the academic scientific field of Linguistics. It already presupposes a solid, profound knowledge of the various literary, linguistic, stylistic and cultural elements of both languages at work.

That is why I have always been astonished by the audacious, daring, bold answer given by scientific people at the start of any ESP Course.

TRANSLATION AS AN AIM

Coming back to the context of situation of any ESP Course we have to bear in mind the enormous relevance that "to know English" —another futile utterance whose range might vary between a native-like performance and a great amount of theoretical knowledge without any practical application at all— has for all these scientific people. They are eager to learn English because for them it is an absolute primary necessity to have access to the latest literature in their respective scientific fields which are inevitably in the English language³.

There is no doubt at all that their motivation in attending those Courses is highly developed. This, in fact, is a very positive advantage for the progress of the course.

As I have already mentioned, the misunderstanding by scientists of the meaning and implications of the word "translation" is at the source of their demand. In fact, they are fully convinced that what they need is to be able to read in English, to completely understand a text, even though they are expressing this need by the term "translation". For most of them this practical aim is quite enough. For some, they are also interested in becoming able to express themselves in English, either

2.— As far as this discipline is concerned I am only giving here some basic sources where the reader can discover by himself/herself, the insights of this old and new subject:
NEWMARK, P. *A Textbook of Translation*, Prentice Hall, 1988.

PICKEN, C. (ed.) *The Translator's Handbook*, Aslib, London, (1983), 1989.

SANTOYO, J.C. *Teoría y Crítica de la traducción: Antología*, Publicaciones de la Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona, Bellaterra, 1987.

SELESKOVITCH-LEDERER, *Interpréter pour traduire*, Publications de la Sobornne, (1984), 1986.

3.— Quirk says that "...at this present time, English is more widely spread, and is the chief language of more countries than any other language is or ever has been". "The English language in a global context", in *English in the World*, edited by R. QUIRK and H. G. WIDDOWSON CUP 1985, p.1.

orally or through a text, and, which is an even more difficult task, to be able to understand spoken English. This has a close reference to the linguistic skill of "listening". All those people still use, no matter whatsoever the great difference in their aims, objectives and tasks, the word "translation" to identify their purposes in coming to one of these ESP Courses. See figure number 3.

I suppose that their intention of expressing all these aims—to be able to listen to English, to speak English, to read English and to write in English—by means of the use of the term "translation" corresponds not just to a simply linguistic ignorance, which could be due to narrowmindedness, on the other hand, quite typical of scientific people in reference to scientific fields other than their own, but probably to the assumption that it would be much better and, which seems to me much more important, much cheaper to attempt the whole thing, i.e. to try to learn the four different linguistic skills as a compact "package". Their ambitious assumption is possibly based on any of the following reasons:

* The wellknown fact that those people who are real translators master perfectly well how to read and how to speak in both languages. So, as these scientific people consider themselves to be very clever they think that people of such a high intelligence as themselves will easily arrive at being able to translate a text after a few hours of learning English.

* The feeling that language is something we are used to taking for granted, and consequently we do not have to invest in it either too much time, or too much money.

* Finally, the coincidence that reading is, in fact, a kind of translation in itself, like listening or speaking, even in our own mother tongue: i.e. translating symbols into meaningful units. In turn, let me say that all acts of real translation start by a thorough research of the reading process.

Thinking of translation as a formal equivalence between two languages is at the origin of the translating machines⁴, and, I wonder if they are the ideal solution—supposing they work properly—for these scientific people. Let me exemplify my reluctant hesitation and doubts about the efficient possibility of these machines, with two examples

4.- J.A. LARGE has an interesting chapter entitled "Machine and machine-aided translation" in *The Foreign-Language Barrier*, A. Deutsch, 1985, pp. 88-116. See also the illuminating article "Los pioneros de la máquina de traducir" written by P. DIAZ PRIETO in *Fides Interpres*, Actas de la Primeras Jornadas Nacionales de Historia de la Traducción, Universidad de León, editadas por J.C. SANTOYO et al. 1989. Vol. II. pp. 305-309.

taken at random from a special translation programme that someone gave me, vaguely insinuating at the same time that we —teachers— were coming to an end because of these sophisticated technological modern inventions.

First, then, I tried to translate into Spanish a simple sentence such as *"I am just writing to you to tell you hello"* and the result was really exciting as you can imagine yourself when you read *"yo estoy escritura justa a usted a contar a usted hello"*. I also tried the other way around, feeding my computer with the Spanish sentence *"yo pretendo profundizar en este terreno"* —whose correct interpretation in English would be something like: I intend to study in detail this topic—, but again the machine surprised me with the following rendering: *"I pretend to deepen in this land"*.

It is true to say that to have translation as an objective of a Course may be an excellent idea, provided that the students of such a Course have the prior knowledge necessary for attaining this aim. But I do not think this is possible when the Course is given to beginners or people with an intermediate level of knowledge of the English language.

It seems to me that one of the most important tasks in preparing an ESP Course is to establish in a clear and practical way the objectives of that Course⁵. These objectives should be effective and possible to achieve. This characteristic of accessibility affects the degree and concreteness of the aim of the Course, which, on the other hand, should correspond to the results of the needs analysis questionnaire.

The importance of setting out explicitly the aims of a Course, in an accessible form, determines in itself half the success of that Course. Everything is going to depend on the objectives, such as:

- *your own design for the Course,
- *the teaching strategies,
- *the preparation of the materials for classes and homework,
- *the motivation factors that, for the students mean the inner force, the springboard, and for us —teachers— are signposts of the students' learning process.

The clearer the establishment of the aim of a Course is the easier it is for us to provide all the teaching paraphernalia which will help the students with their own learning process. And it will also be easier for

5.— The relevant importance of the objectives in a teaching/learning situation was already emphasized in 1968 by w.m. RIVERS, in her book *Teaching Foreign-Language skills*, The University of Chicago Press, when she comments in page 8: "...it is the teacher's objectives which determine the way he approaches the organization of his language lesson".

the students themselves to accept their own responsibility in this teaching-learning situation which constitutes the framework of any ESP Course.

TRANSLATION AS A METHOD

When dealing with translation as one of the possible methods applied to a teaching-learning situation we have to make an explicit distinction visualized in figure number 4 of the appendix.

a) Translation from the target language into the language of instruction, normally at the beginning of the stage in learning the L2, in our case, translating English into Spanish.

b) Translation into the target language from the language of instruction, when the students have already reached a certain level of competence and performance in the L2, in our case, Spanish into English.

With respect to the first option, that is, to employ translation as a method to teach English, this is not new at all and although this practice has had several names throughout the centuries, we know it nowadays as the **grammar-translation method**⁶. Its tenets are the following:

- * emphasis on the study of written language. The fundamental purpose of learning a foreign language is to be able to read literature in the target language, in this case English.

- * the study or grammar is carried out in a deductive way, by rote work.

- * much consideration is given to vocabulary and to its memorization.

- * correctness is also emphasized.

Although the study of the written language might be applicable to the needs of the participants of an ESP Course, I find more negative points than positive ones in the application of this grammar-translation method in teaching English to beginners.

I believe that language is above all a means of communication and consequently I find that both the emphasis on memorizing grammatical

6.- See the chapter dedicated to "Traditional Grammar" in *Linguistic Theory. Linguistic Description and Language Teaching*, by E. ROULET, Longman, (1972), 1975, pp. 5-19. Also consult D. LARSEN-FREEMAN's *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching*, OUP, 1986.

rules and on correctness imply a kind of obstacle more than a help to the students when they want to communicate.

I have always found the emphasis on vocabulary in these ESP Courses and Coursebooks unnecessary as the students are normally familiar with the specialized vocabulary of their own scientific field.

Nowadays, everybody will agree that the best method is the one which better facilitates the learning process of the students, and for that purpose I think that to negotiate the objectives of a Course with the students according to their needs and to have role play in practical situations is much better than to have them learn by heart grammatical paradigms and lists of vocabulary.

READING AND ITS TEACHING

According to Halliday⁷ a text is language in operation. This operation may be carried out by speaking or writing. In our case we are, most of the time, referring to written texts.

So it is the ability of reading which is concerned here. The concept of reading is an active one requiring an intense, active role from the part of the student.

Let us comment now with reference to figure number 5 of the annex, the complex process of reading and its implications for our teaching.

I think that in the process of reading there are four main stages. The first which I would call "**reading up on a text**" basically consists of preparing oneself as a reader to meet a text. This also means investigating about the text you have in mind, looking for information or trying to check what one has previously learnt on one's background about the subject of the text in question.

Of particular interest is the motivation factor, that is, the possible reasons why this text is of interest to us, and all the elements which can

7.- As I consider that professor M. A. K. HALLIDAY has an enormous relevance in today vision of the English language and its teaching, I highly recommend the reader to consult the following works:

Explorations in the Functions of Language, E. Arnold, 1973.

Language as Social Semiotics: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning, E. Arnold, 1978.

An Introduction to Functional Grammar, E. Arnold, 1985.

Also, see the following works in collaboration with his wife, Professor R. HASAN:

Cohesion in English, Longman, 1976.

Language, Context, and text: aspects of Language in a Social-Semiotic Perspective, OUP.

contribute to make this text of interest to us. This motivation constituent will lead us to another important point at this stage: attention. We have to concentrate on this text, analyzing all its details, not only on the text itself but—and this has a close link with another relevant factor of this first stage—with the context of its situation, i.e. all the circumstances that in any way have any bearing on the text such as origin, place, cause, consequences, manner, time, etc...

It is precisely this element of the context of situation of the text which is going to provoke in us all kinds of guessing and hypothesizing, converting thus reading into a very active process.

The second stage, which I call "**reading into a text**" consists of understanding it. For this, it is necessary to be able to decode the language of the text at the four main linguistic levels of the discourse: morphological, syntactic, semantic and its level of cohesion. We also have to take into consideration all the visual clues that the text offers us to fully comprehend its message like tables, drawings, different types of letters and other non-verbal information.

It is at this stage when we can make guesses as to what the text is about, as well as making references to our background and the knowledge we possess about the world.

It is here also where some reading techniques, like skimming (just looking rapidly for the gist of it), scanning (looking for something specific in the text) or predicting, should be practised.

The third stage, which I call "**reading over a text**" is when the checking and verifying of all our previously made hypotheses takes place. Memory, this powerful tool of our minds, both in its short term or long term aspects, helps us at this stage not only through the use of the rules of language but also by means of a constant recurrence to our own experience, both in our mother tongue and in the second language in which the text is written.

The last stage consists of expressing the text in our own ways. I call it "**reading out a text**". This stage is exemplified by some activities like copying, which might just mean a total identification with the text, or questioning about the text by means of questions of different nature like inference, textual or background. Summarizing is another activity in which the reader's cooperation is essential. Also writing another text having the analyzed—read—text as a basis is perhaps the best way of expressing it, just giving birth to another textual output: in other words, making communication possible, and let me remind us that communication is the main objective of language.

What is quite clear is that in this whole process of reading the principal protagonist is the student, although the teacher in his/her

own humble corner has a valuable and significant role also in the teaching/learning situation of the reading skill.

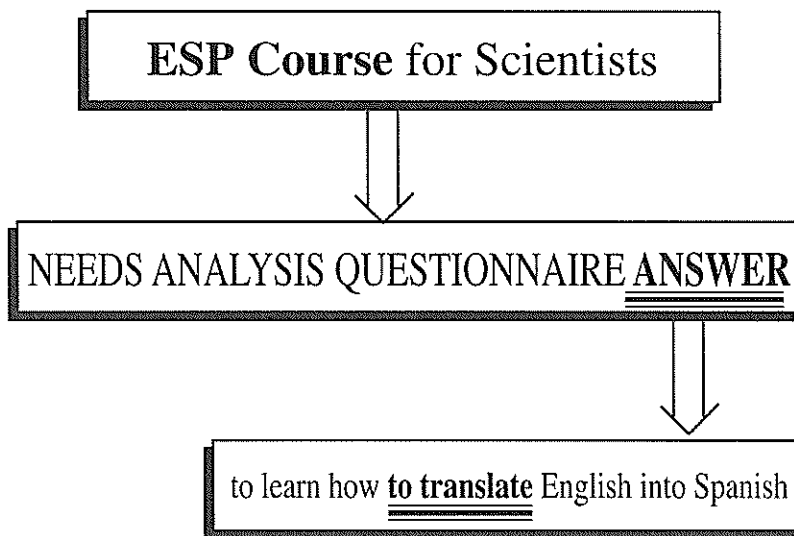
This role mainly consists of providing and facilitating all the requirements of the student's need in his/her reading effort, avoiding all the misleading ways and obstacles that he/she may find, and above all encouraging him/her in his/her fascinating task of discovering a text.

I would like to end this article with Professor Widdowson's words concerning the very concept of pedagogy (whether defined as art or science) emphasizing the teacher's role:

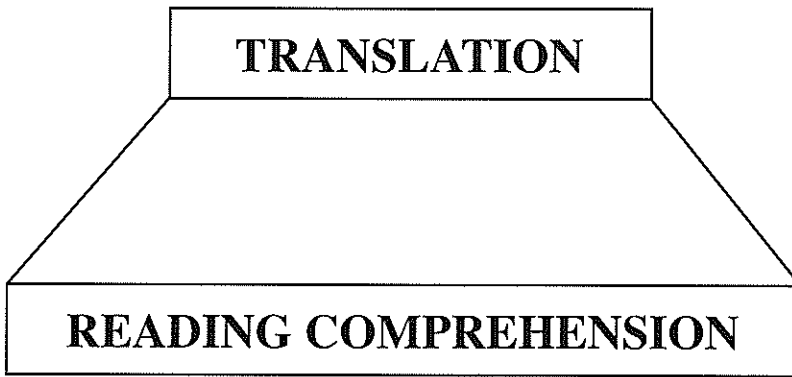
"Most of human progress seems to have come about by making the contrary assumption that nature can be improved upon by artifice of one kind or another. Social institutions, including that of education, are set up to counteract the shortcomings of nature, to control and exploit it and turn it to human advantage. The very concept of pedagogy (whether defined as art or science) presupposes invention and intervention which will direct learners in ways they would not, left to their own devices, have the opportunity or inclination to pursue".⁸

8.- WIDDOWSON, H.G. *Aspects of Language Teaching*, OUP, 1990. p. 48.

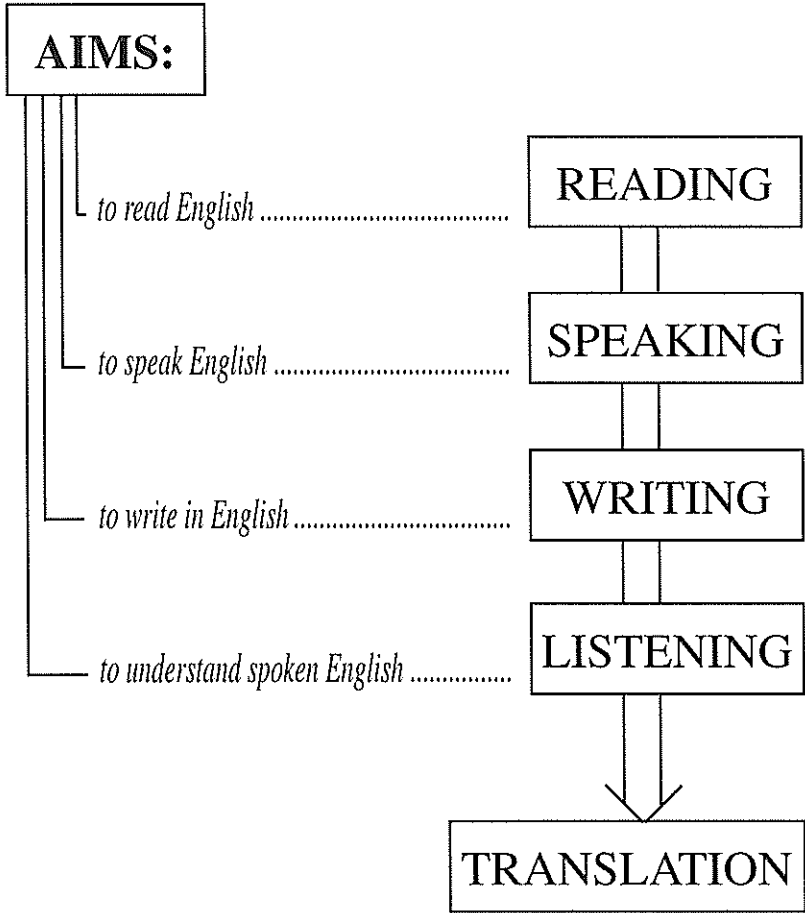
APPENDIX: Fig. n.º 1



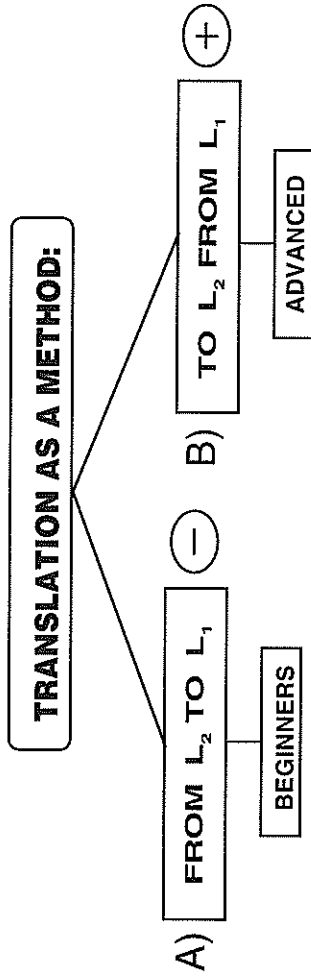
APPENDIX: Fig. n.º 2



APPENDIX: Fig. n.º 3



APPENDIX: Fig. n.º 4



APPENDIX: Fig. n.º 5

