

Translating

How to avoid doing it:

1. Refuse to give translations for new vocabulary yourself. Pretend/Admit you don't speak the student's language whenever possible.
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.
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 students 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
3. Translating some things word for word doesn't help. For example: My mother-in-law once told me that my husband is "necio", which, to me, translated as a "fool. She actually meant he was stubborn.
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.
6. 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. False friends can cause problems. In Spanish the word 'sensible' 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 Spanish for make is 'hacer' and so is the Spanish for 'do'. The Spanish for 'job' is 'trabajo' and so the Spanish 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.