

## The Importance of Translation in EFL Teaching Experience: Translation and Second Language Acquisition

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### Abstract

With the growing importance of learner-centered language teaching, it is argued that anything that helps the learner in his or her own learning process is surely an asset. Hence, researchers and practitioners are urged to investigate what is of assistance to learners in order to help them arrive at their objective in the most economic way. Translation as an aid to learning is likely to be favored by analytically oriented learners.

This paper will discuss the purpose of translation in the language classroom to develop learners' mastery of English language, since the basic knowledge of translation techniques that learners gained in the classroom can serve as a solid ground for building up language skills. This paper then tries to answer the following question: Does translation promote foreign language learning and foreign language proficiency?

**Key Words:** EFL – Second Language Acquisition – Translation – Foreign Language Proficiency

### الملخص

إن إبراز دور الترجمة الرائد في مجال تعليم اللغات الأجنبية في الجزائر لأمر في غاية الأهمية لكون الترجمة أداة لا يستهان بها لتعلم اللغات حيث أنها لا تتمن فحسب اللغة كوسيلة للتواصل وإنما تطور الكفاءات اللغوية للطلبة من خلال ممارسة الفعل الترجمي الذي من شأنه إبراز المهارات اللغوية للمتعلمين للغات الأجنبية وفتح آفاق واسعة للاتصال والتفاعل مع الآخر.

ولهذا كان الهدف من هذه المداخلة هو التركيز على الدور الفعال والقيم للترجمة بالنسبة لتعليم اللغة الإنجليزية في جامعاتنا مع تسليط الضوء على كيفية تطبيق هذه الطريقة للوصول إلى الهدف المنشود أي الكفاءة اللغوية لدى طلبة اللغات الأجنبية.

### Le résumé :

Cet article traite le but de la traduction dans la classe de langue pour développer la maîtrise de la langue anglaise chez les apprenants, étant donné que la connaissance de base des techniques de traduction que les apprenants ont acquis dans la classe peut servir comme une base solide pour l'acquisition des compétences linguistiques. Ce travail tente alors de répondre à la question suivante: Est-ce que la traduction sert à promouvoir l'apprentissage des langues étrangères et la maîtrise de la langue étrangère?

## Introduction

The development of linguistic sciences and the rapid increase of practical needs did previously bring about a violent reaction against the so called ‘Grammar-Translation Method’ in teaching languages. The consequence was a complete discredit of translation itself as a teaching tool. The mono-structural version of the ‘Direct Method totally disregards the native language, both in preparing teaching materials and in classroom practice. However, the most recent variations, ‘The Contrastive or Bi-Structural Method,’ allows the use of translation in so far as it provides a necessary step towards obtaining the data for contrastive analysis, which in turn becomes a preliminary for grading teaching materials and making decisions concerning their preparation.

As a matter of fact, translation has become a recognized criterion for establishing the crucial notion of equivalence. Thus, it must be considered as one of the basic devices for all those who plan language courses or write language textbooks, in the same way as it is a basic tool for those who deal with contrastive structural studies for theoretical purposes. Then, the chief concern here is to try to establish the function and role of translation in the language teaching process today through many studies conducted in this field of translation and foreign languages in countries that use English as a Foreign Language to show that translation retained a legitimate position in modern language teaching, provided it is defined and applied strictly in accordance with the findings of linguistic science.

Nowadays, translation is widely used in learners’ foreign language learning process since the learners often use it as a learning strategy to comprehend, remember, and produce a foreign language. However, relatively little research attention so far seems to have been devoted to a consideration of the use of translation in language learning. Thus, this study aims to explore the role of translation in language learning, particularly in terms of the learning beliefs and learning strategies about using translation to learn English.

In addition to its usual definition in transferring meanings and conveying messages, translation can also be viewed as a strategy for learning foreign languages. Oxford defined translating as **“converting the target language expression into the native language (at various levels, from words and phrases all the way up to whole texts); or converting the native language into the target language.”** (1) Likewise, Chamot described the translation strategy as **“using the first language as a base for understanding and/or producing the second language.”** (2) In a similar vein, the definition of translation in the present study refers to using one language as a basis for understanding, remembering, or producing another language, both at the lexical level and the syntactic level, and also in either direction from the target or the source language into the other language.

Translation has been used by foreign language learners to facilitate language learning for centuries, but translation has played various roles under different language teaching methods. While some foreign language educators may consider translation as a critical means to ensure students’ comprehension and an important writing exercise, other teachers may totally ban or discourage the use of the native language and translation in the classroom.

## Review

The issue of the use of translation in language teaching is one on which most language teachers have a view, but fairly often, teachers' views are not strongly in favor of it.(3) Particularly from the turn of the twentieth century onwards, many theoretical works and practical methods in language teaching have assumed that a second language (L2) should be taught without reference to the learners' first language (L1). It has become a popular belief among teachers that the translation of L1 gets in the way with the acquisition of L2. For example, the Grammar-Translation Method views translation as essential for foreign language instruction and learning. However, this method has been denounced in foreign language teaching for decades. Under the later-developed Direct Method and Audio-Lingual Method, translation was banned and no longer included as a part of classroom activities. In the current most popular Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach, the target language is used during authentic, functional, communicative activities, and students' native language has no particular role in the classroom. Many CLT teachers maintain that the best way for learners to achieve native-like control of the target language is to think in that language rather than to translate or reprocess the target language into their mother tongue.(4)

While many foreign language educators may have ignored the role of translation in language teaching, from the learners' perspective, translation is still widely used in their learning.(5) For instance, Naiman et al. aimed to identify strategies used by Good Language Learners (GLLs), and found that one of the strategies often used by GLLs was to **“refer back to their native language(s) judiciously (translate into L1) and make effective cross-lingual comparisons at different stages of language learning”**(6). In research on learners' beliefs about foreign language learning, researchers have suggested that learners' preconceived beliefs would likely affect the way they use learning strategies and learn a foreign language. Wenden's study illustrates how beliefs affected learners' choice of strategies, their attending pattern, criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of a language learning activity, and their planning priorities.(7) Based on her survey of foreign language students, Horwitz also argues that some preconceived beliefs are likely to restrict the learners' range of strategy use.(8)

## The Importance of Translation in L2 Learning

In terms of using translation as a learning strategy, translation has often been classified as one of the cognitive learning strategies. Translation, in a rather broad sense, can be seen as a phenomenon of transfer of one's language to another language. Under the CLT approach, however, language teachers assume that translating is not a good learning strategy. They argue that by thinking in the target language, students increase their chances of becoming fluent and accurate in that language and avoiding interference from their L1. Nonetheless, such an assumption seems to lack much empirical evidence.(9) Corder would rather emphasize more on viewing L1 as a valuable resource which learners can use for translation to make up their limitations in learning a L2. He proposed to reframe the concept of 'interference' as 'intercession' in order to consider learners' use of their L1 as a strategy of

communication.(10) In fact, more and more studies have suggested a positive and facilitative role of translation or L1 transfer in students' language learning. (11)

Additionally, in comparing the use of both translation and context in learning L2 vocabulary, Prince observed that learning vocabulary in context is widely perceived by teachers as a desirable strategy, but students often actively resist it and believe that the translation learning, with the new word being linked to its native language equivalent, is more effective in learning new vocabulary. (12) Because students have often been encouraged by their teachers to think in the target language, some students may have come to believe that it is detrimental for them to depend on their native language while learning and using the target language. In students' perceptions about L2 writing through translation versus writing directly in the L2, Kobayashi and Rinnert reported that 88% of the higher proficiency Japanese participants preferred direct composition to translation, whereas 53% of lower proficiency students also favored direct composition. Several students said that they preferred direct writing because they wanted to be able to think in English.(13) In other cases, in reporting on a Chinese context linking English learner variables to English achievement, Wen and Johnson selected ten English major students in China for an in-depth qualitative study to elucidate the differences between high and low achievers through interviews, diary studies, and strategy use while working on a reading task. Their data showed that, regarding the use of the mother-tongue-avoidance strategy, the low achievers thought the use of translation would not hinder their progress, but the high achievers stated explicitly that using Chinese would be harmful for their English learning. Wen and Johnson concluded that Chinese students should be encouraged to suppress the use of translation resolutely and consciously.(14) Contrary to Wen and Johnson's conclusion, Hsieh found that translation benefited his Taiwanese students' English reading in terms of enhancing their reading comprehension, reading strategies, vocabulary learning, and cultural background knowledge. He administered a questionnaire regarding attitudes and thoughts toward translation to Taiwanese college students at the end of one year of EFL instruction using a translation method. Of the 52 participants, 85% expressed that translating can help them pay attention to the coherence and contextualization of English reading text; 73% of the students said that they learned the importance of their native language (Chinese) through translation; 65% thought that they became more aware of multiple meanings of an English word; 62% felt that translation helped extend vocabulary knowledge and reading skills.(15) In general, these students believed that the adoption of translation had positive effects on their English reading and vocabulary learning.

If a strong case for translation in the language classroom is to be made, at least three things ought to be demonstrated: that criticisms against it are not valid, that learners need it, and that it promotes their learning. The studies that have tackled commonly made criticisms (e.g. translation teaches learners about language, and doesn't really help them learn how to use it, or that it fosters the excessive use of the mother tongue) have demonstrated that these objections are justified only if translation practice amounts to the regular combination of grammar rules with translation into the target language as the principle practice technique. They have also shown that if properly designed, translation activities can be employed to enhance the four skills and develop accuracy, clarity and flexibility. (16) As regards the use of

the native language, its effect on language acquisition has been the subject of many debates lately. Addressing the issues connected with it is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it suffices to say that teachers should constantly bear in mind that in an EFL situation L1 ought to be employed judiciously.

### Translation as a Learning Strategy

Since language learning strategy research mushroomed and various classifications of these strategies were carried out, translation has usually been identified as one of the cognitive learning strategies. Moreover, Kobayashi and Rinnert found that Japanese college students who wrote English essays through Japanese translation were rated higher than those who wrote directly in English.(17) As for the advantages of translating, the students felt that the ideas were easier to develop, thoughts and opinions could be expressed more clearly, and words could be more easily found through the use of dictionary. In addition, translation also can help in vocabulary acquisition. Prince's research results revealed the superiority of using translation in learning vocabulary in terms of quantity of words learned. It is believed by these researchers that strategic learners can make intelligent use of the repertoire of their L1 skills and translation in order to learn a new language.(18) Also, researchers have varied opinions at which stage the use of translation is most beneficial for the learner. Husain's research suggested that using translation had highly positive effects on the low and intermediate proficiency learners, but it did not benefit higher level students. The researcher found that translation strategy could enhance English learning in general. It was also discovered that students who used translation tended to make more gains in learning vocabulary and phrases, compared to a lower level gain in learning tenses. This finding implies that semantic aspects of language are more generally shared across languages than structural aspects.(19)

Another important finding was that the intermediate level students made more gains than those higher level peers did, and the gains made by the lower level students were higher than those by the intermediate level students. In other words, the higher level students benefited the least from translation use. (20) In contrast, other researchers advocate the use of translation at the advanced level. Advanced learners may have already developed a somewhat solid foundation of the target language, and thus can be more likely to discern the subtle differences of vocabulary meaning and grammar usage between their L1 and L2. For example, Perkins indicates that through translation instruction, **“the advanced learner will always gain some insight into points of L1-L2 difference and conflict on a syntactic, semantic and stylistic**

Translation is seen as an important tool to upgrade high-level students' learning. Titford shares the same view and proposes that translation is an appropriate resource for advanced learners. He argues that translation can serve as a problem-solving exercise as well as a cognitive exercise in the classroom.(22) Advanced learners are often keen to know the underlying rule behind a particular foreign language, and tend to ask the question how an expression is translated in the foreign language and what rules are involved. More importantly, the use of translation at the advanced level can help learners extend their knowledge of the foreign language by making reference to their mother tongue, and then help

learners clarify the similarities and the differences between the foreign language and their native language.

In a study conducted in Central Taiwan. A total of 351 students were selected to participate for a quantitative survey. The results showed that:

1. Translating helps the participants understand textbook readings.
2. Translating helps them write English composition.
3. Translating helps them understand spoken English.
4. Translating helps them speak English.
5. Translating helps them memorize English vocabulary.
6. Translating helps them understand English grammar rules.
7. Translating helps them learn English idioms and phrases.
8. Translation helps me understand their teacher's English instructions.
9. Translation helps them interact with their classmates in English class to complete assignments.
10. The more difficult the English assignments are, the more they depend on Chinese translation.
11. Using Chinese translation helps them finish their English assignments more quickly and save time.
12. Using Chinese translation while studying helps them better recall the content of a lesson later.
13. At this stage of learning, the participants think they cannot learn English without Chinese translation.
14. The participants think everyone has to use Chinese translation at this stage of learning.
15. Participants feel pressure when they are asked to think directly in English.
16. They finally believe that one needs to be immersed in an English-speaking culture for some time before he/she is able to think in English.(23)

On the whole, the participants overwhelmingly believe that translating helps them acquire English language skills such as reading, writing, speaking, vocabulary, idioms, and phrases. These findings are consistent with Prince's (1996) study that students believed that translation learning was more effective than context learning in learning new vocabulary words, and with Hsieh's findings that Taiwanese students thought that translation helped their



reading comprehension and vocabulary learning.(24) These findings are further supported and validated by the interviews with ten participants. These interviewees expressed ideas about the positive and good effects of using translation in their learning process. The positive aspects of using translation include that: (1) translation can help students comprehend English; (2) translation can help students to check whether their comprehension is correct; (3) translation eases memory constraints in memorizing more words, idioms, grammar, and sentence structures; (4) translation can help students develop and express ideas in another language; and (5) translation can help reduce learning anxiety and enhance motivation to learn English. (25)

Specifically speaking, students most frequently use translation to learn English vocabulary words, idioms, phrases, and grammar, to read, write, and speak English, and to check their reading and listening comprehension.

### **Do Learners Really Need Translation?**

To rephrase the question following these findings, will the learner have to use translation once he has learned L2? The answer to this question is positive, for translation is a real life communicative activity – the learners translate in class for peers, decodes signs and notices in the environment, translates instructions and letters for friends and relations, etc. Moreover, with the increased mobility of persons and goods in a unified, multilingual world, translation is expected to be practiced almost on daily basis. In addition, one should not lose sight of that language competence is a two-way system that one needs to be able to communicate into and from the language system. Yet little guidance is given how to communicate back into the mother tongue, something that many professionals need to do in their daily work.

Put more simply, does it help learners learn the language? The reply is again affirmative. Individual learners have reported that they find it beneficial, and this has been confirmed by empirical research. Investigating learning strategies employed by students of English as a second language and in a foreign language setting, O'Malley and Chamot have established that translation (defined as using the first language as a base for understanding and /or producing the second language) accounted for over 30 percent of strategy uses. In both language groups, beginner students mostly rely on repetition, translation and transfer, whereas more advanced students resort to inferencing, though without abandoning familiar strategies such as repetition and translation.(26) The other empirical study reporting findings relevant to this topic is Friedlander's. Drawing on the results of several investigations and his own experiments, he ascertained that planning on certain language topics seems to be enhanced when writers use the language of topic-area knowledge. Translation from the native language into English appears to help rather than hinder writers: they were able to access more information when working in their first language. Hence, Friedlander concludes that ESL writers should be encouraged to use their first language while composing a draft and then translate (27).

## **What Kind of Translation do Learners Need?**

The purpose of translation in the language classroom is not to train professionals, but to help learners develop their knowledge of English. In other words, it is a means to an end, not an end to be achieved. However, some learners may become translators one day, and the basic knowledge of translation that they have gained in the classroom can serve as a solid ground for building up translation skills.

The commonly held view is that translation requires a high level of proficiency. As a cognitively demanding process, it is more appropriate for adult learners. Nonetheless, if properly designed, translation activities can be successfully applied at all levels and ages. In deciding whether to use it, the teachers should take into consideration the preferences of their learners, their own pedagogical objectives and the moment-by-moment exigencies of the teaching context and situation they are in.

Also, Translating from L2 into L1 seems to be natural, but what about a more demanding task, rendering L1 into L2? It is certainly advisable to stick to easier modes at lower levels and leave the difficult ones for a more advanced stage, although some very simple L1-L2 translation activities, especially those involving awareness raising, can also be carried out at the initial stages of learning.

We have as well organization. This involves deciding how to administer translation activities, and choosing the most appropriate forms of classroom interaction. Translation is a serious business which requires careful preparation both on the part of the teacher and the learner. Distributing a text and telling your students “translate” is not a very good way to start. Carefully graded preparatory activities are necessary, and they can be integrated in reading, listening and writing activities, and also in vocabulary and grammar practice. Since translation is time consuming, it is advisable that longer pieces should be done at home.

Almost all authors seem to be in agreement that translation is most useful as a quick and easy way to present the meaning of words and contextualized items, and when it is necessary to draw attention to certain differences that would otherwise go unnoticed.

However, it would be wrong to limit the role of translation only to the presentation of lexical items. One should rather explore ways for its appropriate application within the communicative paradigm, and create challenging language activities which have cognitive depth. Hence, translation activities pursued in an EFL classroom ought to be used for a purpose, to create a desire for communication, and encourage students to be creative and contribute their ideas.

## **Conclusions**

Several researches were reported in this study, and the principal findings suggested that translation plays a positive role in the English learning experiences. Learners show a high level use of translation as a learning strategy, and they use a wide variety of strategies involving translation, including cognitive, memory, compensation, social, and affective strategies.



On the whole, translation seems to play an important facilitative role in students' English learning process. With respect to students' shared beliefs about using translation in learning English, generally they express the inevitability of translation use at their phase of learning, and considered translation as a positive learning resource for them to comprehend, memorize, and produce better English, to acquire English skills, and to complete various English tasks. When it comes to the use of translation as a strategy to learn English, on average, students were found to have a medium to high level of translation strategy use. They employ a wide variety of learning strategies involving translation to help them strengthen their English skills and solve language problems. Specifically, the use of translation as memory, compensation, cognitive, affective, and social strategies were identified as frequently used strategies among these students.

As the findings in this study indicated, the use of translation could be a valuable resource or tool that can contribute to the development of various language skills. In fact, the strategic use of L1 or translation would be helpful in developing learners' reading efficiency and maintaining the flow of their conversation and writing tasks. From this study, teachers may gain insights into the role of translation in the students' learning process and ways to integrate these insights into their teaching. Teachers may not need to prohibit students' use of translation altogether, and they should be more aware of the instances when translation can be beneficial as students try to develop their English language system. At the same time, although students on different proficiency levels may use translation as a strategy differently, they should all be advised to stay away from the possible pitfalls of L1 interference and word-for-word translations.

Translation seems to be an often used strategy and preferred language practice technique for many students in EFL settings. As such, it undoubtedly has place in the language classroom. However, translation is not a time-saving device. It can be invaluable in provoking discussion and helping teachers increase their own and their students' awareness of the remarkable interaction between the mother tongue and the target language inevitably occurring in the process of language acquisition.

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