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## The Use of Translation as a Tool in EFL Learning. Case Study: University .Students

استخدام الترجمة كأداة لتعلم اللغة الانجليزية. دراسة حول طلاب الجامعة.

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## Abstract :

This study aims to show the pedagogical importance of translation. To do so, a questionnaire was conducted to EFL students at Tahri Mohammed University of Bechar for the aim of gathering information about the realities around the use of translation as a pedagogical tool. Moreover, random sessions were attended with the three levels to investigate the different attitudes and behaviors of both EFL teachers and students towards translation, and how can this tool serve EFL learning. Furthermore, to investigate the effectiveness of translation activities and to see whether the students benefit from them, two simple translation activities were designed and conducted for only ten (10) volunteers from each level .

Keywords: foreign language; mother tongue; pedagogy; translation.

## ملخص:

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى إظهار الأهمية التربوية للترجمة. وللقيام بذلك، تم إجراء استبيان لطلاب جامعة اللغة الإنجليزية في جامعة الطاهري محمد في بشار بهدف جمع المعلومات حول الحقائق حول استخدام الترجمة كأداة تعليمية. وعلاوة على ذلك، تم حضور ومراقبة الفصول الدراسية للمستويات الثلاثة للتحقيق في المواقف والسلوكيات المختلفة لكل من معلمي وطلاب اللغة الانجليزية تجاه الترجمة، وكيف يمكن لهذه الأداة أن تخدم التعلم. ومن أجل استقصاء فعالية أنشطة الترجمة ومعرفة ما إذا كان الطلاب يستفيدون منها، تم تصميم وتنفيذ نشاطين بسيطين للترجمة لعشرة (10) متطوعين فقط من كل مستوى.

الكلمات المفتاحية: لغة أجنبية: اللغة الأم: التعليم: الترجمة.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Teachers vary in the way they teach foreign languages. One teacher can use different methods due to the nature of the lessons, students' needs, and the level of the students. Some teachers support the use of translation during class while others discourage the use of L1 in the classroom.

Translation represents the first, vital tool that EFL learners refer to when they

first learn English. Most of the students use their bilingual, monolingual, and e-dictionaries while others may use their L1 to express their ideas during class. After being familiar with most language structures, some learners stop or reduce the dependence on translation and try new methods to learn the language, and others keep using this method as the first tool to refer to when they face new vocabulary.

Several studies had been conducted for the aim of proving or neglecting the effectiveness of the use of translation in EFL

learning and teaching, some of these studies reveal the negative attitudes towards translation. Teachers using the L1 for the EFL classes are being criticized most of the time even if some cases impose the use of translation for teaching. This controversy leads to asking the following questions:

- (1) What do learners think of translation as a didactic tool for EFL learning?
- (2) How can translation be included as a more effective method of language learning?
- (3) How far did technological development affect pedagogical translation?

It is hypothesized that translation can be a good tool for EFL learning if students and teachers use it the right way by including it within the appropriate tasks and using it in collaboration with the other skills of the language. It is also hypothesized that depending too much on translation in EFL learning may discourage students to deal with authentic sources or to gain native language competence and fluency; besides, translation may be needed only for beginners, and that learners/ teachers should develop their methodology as far as they go far with language competency. Furthermore, it is assumed that electronic tools of translation are not trustworthy and cannot always provide the learner with valid translation.

The main objective of this study is to investigate the effects of using translation for EFL learning, and how beneficial can this later be for EFL learners. This study also aims at showing how this pedagogical tool can be used in better ways.

This study is important for the domain of foreign languages and specifically for EFL learning, it sheds lights on this pedagogical tool; showing its value for EFL learning and its weaknesses, based on the scientific analysis of real situations during

EFL classes and on the answers of EFL students on the questionnaires and activities which were directed. This study also provides general guidelines for better use of this pedagogical tool and how it can be correctly involved in the learning process.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Definition of translation

There are several definitions of translation and different concepts of what that term means either in research or in teaching. The more effective concept is the one that involves both communication and intercultural competence and less opposed to language learning. Leonardi (2010, p. 91) stated, "If translation is employed for pedagogical purposes then it can be referred to as 'pedagogical translation' and it can prove to be a useful aid aimed at teaching and learning foreign languages."

In its written or spoken form, translation refers to the action of retransforming a given kind of context from a source language to a target language as long as the translated piece reflects the same message held by the original one. "translation is rendering the meaning of a text into another language in the way that the author intended the text" (Newmark, 1988, p. 05), that is to say; translation is the act of reforming ideas, concepts, images and messages into another linguistic structure rather than just a word for word replacement. The term translation in this study primarily focuses on the reception, production, and reworking of spoken or written texts that takes place in the physical classroom.

### 2.2. Translation in EFL teaching

It is no doubt that translation is not a learning-teaching method itself, it is usually

combined and implicated with other teaching methods, serving as a vital helping tool for teaching foreign languages to EFL learners. This pedagogical method offers the opportunity for the use of the learners' L1 during EFL sessions.

Several methods were made to teach English to EFL learners. Each of these approaches was distinct by its own and unique set of strategies and specifically designed activities, to ensure better learning of the English language as a foreign language and the achievement of the learning outcomes of both learning and teaching process, and to reach the planned goals of that process, also each one of these methods has its supporters and ploys.

### 2.3. Translation activities

Since translation has been always more likely to be a text-bound phenomenon, especially when it takes place in EFL classrooms, the best way to integrate this later in the teaching process is through the direction of translation activities. This way, EFL teachers and learners could benefit the maximum from this pedagogical tool and use it to develop communicative competencies and foreign language use.

The use of authentic texts can be a motivating move for students to learn the grammar and vocabulary of the language. Nolasco and Arthur (1995) suggest that translation activities should meet the following criteria:

1. Language is used for a purpose.
2. Translation activities encourage effective communication.
3. Translation activities encourage students' creativity.
4. Students should focus on what they are saying, rather than on how they are saying it.
5. The teacher only supervises learners.

6. Students have the freedom to explain themselves through the different kinds of classroom interactions.

Furthermore, translation activities should always rely on the language learning process, based on authentic texts and materials that suit the learners' level and capacities. For more effective teaching, the teacher's role during translation activities should reflect more supervision and guidance, and lies more on predicting the difficulties facing the EFL learners, select the learners' needs and assess them.

Any translation activity should be well prepared to fit both learners' needs and levels. The texts to be translated by learners could be an article from a newspaper or a magazine, a technical text, a poem or a letter, or any other type of authentic texts that reflect interest and appropriateness and help to accomplish the main objectives of the translation activity which generally could be vocabulary, grammar enrichment or effective communication encouragement. For more effectiveness, translation activities should be done in the order below: pre-translation activities, translation activities, then post-translation activities (Scrivener, 2005).

#### 2.3.1. pre-translation activities

Strategies mainly applied to make the students familiar with the translation process they are going to deal with, and avoid translation difficulties, most of the time based on post-reading, grammar, vocabulary practical tasks. For presenting new lessons or a task to do, the teacher would better implement some strategies like brainstorming topics, so the examination of the topic or the title of the text gives useful information for better comprehension and helps students to guess better the kind of

information expected from the text they are going to deal with. This kind of activity also supplements students with the necessary vocabulary and practical or difficult words that they may face during the task (Richards & Rodgers, 1986).

It is always necessary for the teacher to prepare well the lesson before presenting it to his students, and ask his students to bring their dictionaries, as it is necessary for him also to have at least a monolingual and a bilingual dictionary with his company. The teacher can also make anticipation guides to measure his students' prior knowledge, so after reading the text they can review their prior answers. These warming strategies help teachers to get their students' attention and activate their prior knowledge on the topic for better comprehension. (Leonardi, 2010).

### 2.3.2. translation activities

After getting the students familiar with the text they will deal with, and motivating them to participate in the task, both students and the teacher will feel more comfortable and perform better while doing the task. This way, the results will be more satisfying because translation activities cannot just be done by asking the students to translate a distributed text in front of them (Scrivener, 2005).

As a translation activity cannot be done in isolation from the other linguistic skills, the teacher can benefit from this interference like to do the translation task through speaking and listening skills; by asking his students to read the given text silently and avoid aloud reading at the very beginning, because it may implicate some issues rather than being a helpful skill to apply for the task. After a careful silent reading of the text to translate, it is possible

to make some students read the text aloud to correct pronunciation and discuss the text content with the students before translating it (Grabe & Stoller, 2004).

Another kind of translation activities that offers a better chance to compare between the target language and the source language is the use of parallel texts; where the students are given two versions of the text to work on in parallel, so the first version represents the original text and the second may be the translation of this text or represents a description of the previous text. In other words, this side-by-side representation of the two texts allows students to analyze well the two texts and discover how different structures are built in both languages and versions of the text (Leonardi, 2010).

### 2.3.3. post-translation activities

After translating the text with the students, it is required to test their feedback towards the task and make sure that they have learned what they were supposed to learn from the activity, and at least they have mastered some new words that seemed difficult and unanimous to them when they first dealt with the text. Measuring the feedback at the end of the task is a vital step for better performance in the next one for both students and teachers (Richards & Rodgers, 1986).

Post-translation activities are designed for measurement, so after translating the text, the teacher can test his learners' acquirement orally, like to ask them general questions about what was the text about, these questions may also be in a written form, or He can ask them to write summaries of the text in their own words and correct them later, or just choose some students to read their summaries. When the

students expect that they will be asked for feedback on the text they are dealing with, they will- for sure- focus on the activity and do their best. Post- translation activities enable both the teacher and students to correct mistakes, solve problems with the comprehension of the text, they also show the teacher if He accomplished the objectives of the translating task and help the students to keep in mind what they have learned.

### 3. Methodology

This study is about the use of translation as a tool for EFL learning which was conducted at Tahri Mohammed University of Bechar (TMUB). It aims to know the value of translation in the classroom through classroom observation, a questionnaire, and translation activities.

The participants of this study were 96 students from different levels: first, second, and third-year EFL students at TMUB. This variety of samples between the three levels of English language learners provided us with different views and opinions about the use of translation as a tool for learning a language.

#### 3.1. Data collection procedures

Classroom observation, a questionnaire, and translation activities were used as primary data in this research.

##### 3.1.1. classroom observation

This method was used to obtain a clear idea about the behavior of both students and teachers in the classroom towards translation; whether the students/ teachers pursue it, or use it regularly to deal with the different terms of the EFL or they refer to it as a last resort. Three (3) random sessions were attended, one for each level. Attending a variety of sessions with different teachers of

the EFL like grammar, oral expression, or linguistics allowed us to see how far translation can take place in the process of EFL teaching/learning.

The first session was a grammar lesson about phrases for first-year students of English. After greeting the students, the teacher asked them to review the previous lesson which was about conjunctions; then he addressed them saying: *“Now we are going to see another part of speech which is ‘the phrase’”*. He added: *“someone to define ‘phrase’ please!”* To help the students get the exact meaning of this word after he saw no reaction from them, the teacher added: *“Is it like the French word ‘phrase’? [fya:z]”*; Then he confirmed: *“No, it is not the same because in French ‘La phrase’ [la fya:z] refers to just one thing, while the English word “phrase” refers to more than one thing, also in French this word refers to a complete and independent sentence while in the English language refers to a meaningful group of words within a sentence.”*

It was noticed that some of the students went back to their dictionaries when the teacher asked for defining the word, but they were too slow to answer the question before the teacher answered. While the students were reading the summary from the handouts provided, they stopped them from time to time to explain and discuss the content of the paragraphs and extract rules from the examples in the handout. Although the words in the handout were not too easy for first-year students to understand, the teacher avoided translating them and made his students guess the meaning from the context, most of the time. This does not mean that he did not use this method at all during class, for example, when the students did not know the meaning of “qualities”, he



learning, the last section contains three (3) questions that discuss the relationship between technology and translation and how far students are familiar with the different software of translation.

### 3.1.3. activities

To investigate the level of the students in translation, and to shed light on the electronic translation efficiency, two activities were designed: the first contains a short passage, taken from a short English story, the students had to translate it to the Standard Arabic twice, first without referring to their dictionaries than with the use of bilingual dictionaries. This activity was followed by multiple-choice questions to check if they enjoyed the activity, or if the use of the bilingual dictionary helped them to do a faster and effective translation.

In the second activity, the students were given a simple proverb written in English, and they had to use the Google Translation website to translate it to Standard Arabic then, take the result as it is and translate it back to the English language. After the activity, the students were supposed to answer whether they were satisfied with the result they came up with. The main purpose of the first task is to test the students' ability in translation and how far they can guess meanings, then to investigate the effectiveness of bilingual dictionaries use for EFL students. The second task is designed to investigate the validity of electronic translation results, and how far EFL students trust this technology.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The discussion of the questionnaire and the activities are based on the analysis of the students' answers while the discussion of the classroom observations is based on the analysis of the behaviors and attitudes of the teachers and the students towards translation during class.

### 4.1. The classroom observation

According to the attended sessions, it is remarkable that the huge majority of EFL students had always their e-dictionaries. Concerning the use of the learners' mother tongue in the classroom, most of the students felt more comfortable to express themselves using their mother tongue. The majority of the teachers used translation/ learners' mother tongue only when needed and encouraged their students to guess the meaning through explanation, illustration, gestures, and miming. The flexibility of some teachers towards the use of mother tongue in the classroom encouraged the learners to be more involved in the lesson and express their ideas clearly.

### 4.2. Analysis of the questionnaire

Our Participants are 32 students from each level; (the 1st; 2nd and third-year of English), they are 45.83% males and 54.16% females. The majority of them are less than 19 years old (76%), whereas those of 20- 24 years old represent 18% while the students that are over 25 years old represent only 05% of the whole population.

#### 4.2.1. the effectiveness of translation

1/ In your opinion, how useful is translation as a means of learning English?

**Table 1:**

*The Usefulness of Translation*

Option	N°	%
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<b>Useful</b>	56	58.33%
<b>Not useful</b>	15	15.62%
<b>Have no opinion</b>	25	26.04%

2/ Do you think you can make faster progress in EFL learning through translation?

**Table 2:**

*Progress through Translation*

<b>Option</b>	<b>N°</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Yes</b>	59	61.45%
<b>No</b>	37	38.54%

The majority of the students assumed that translation helps them to make faster progress in EFL learning (61.45%); while 38.54% of them thought they cannot.

3/ What language skills do you feel can be strengthened the most by using translation?

**Table 3:**

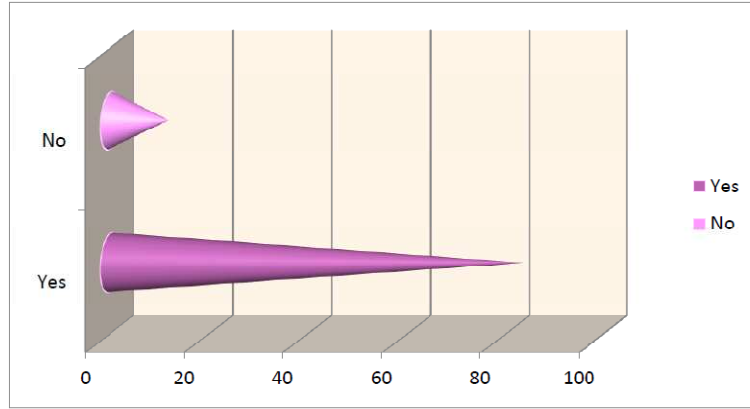
*The Most Strengthened Skill through Translation*

<b>Option</b>	<b>N°</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Reading and Vocabulary</b>	62	64.58%
<b>Grammar</b>	08	8.33%
<b>Speaking</b>	36	37.50%
<b>Writing</b>	35	36.45%
<b>Listening</b>	11	11.45%

The answers of the participants show that the most skill that can be strengthened through the use of translation, is the reading and vocabulary skill (64.58%), then the speaking skill (37.50%), the writing skill (36.45%), listening (11.45%) and finally the grammar (8.33%).

#### **4.2.2. The Need of Translation in Learning a Foreign Language**

1/ Did you use to translate from your mother tongue when you first started learning English?



**Figure 1:** The Use of Translation for Learning English at the First Time

As mentioned above, 87.50% of the students used translation from their mother tongue when they first learned English, (51.19% of these still depend on this tool and 48.80% do not), and only 12.50% of them did not rely on this method to learn English at the very beginning.

2/ How often do you refer to your mother tongue during class?

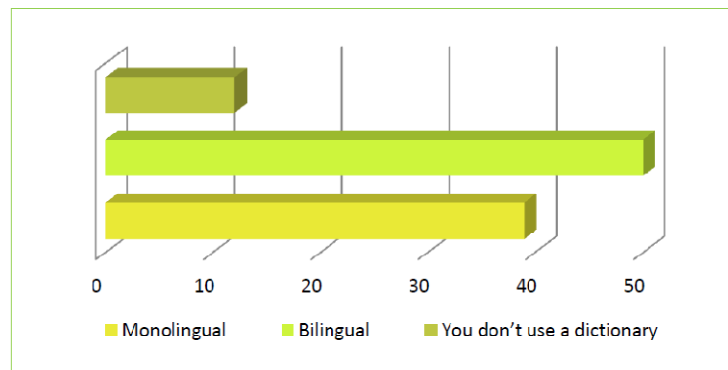
**Table 4:**

*Reference to the Mother Tongue in Class*

Option	N°	%
Always	17	17.70%
Sometimes	53	55.20%
As a last resort	26	27.08%

As mentioned above, around half of the participants (55.20%) sometimes use their mother tongue during class, 27.08% of them refer to it as a last resort and only 17.70 of them use it regularly.

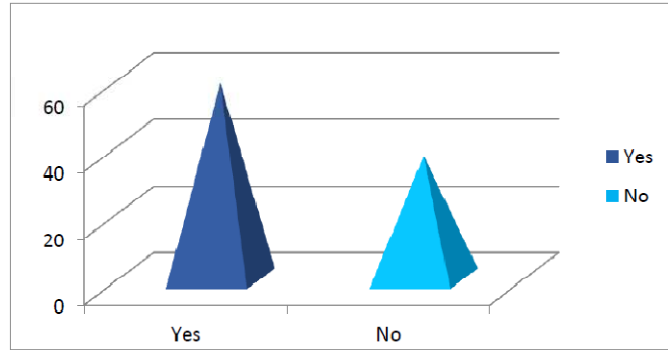
3/ What type of dictionaries do you use?



**Figure 2:** Type of Dictionaries Used.

Some students stated that they have monolingual dictionaries (40.62%), others said that they use bilingual dictionaries (58.08%), while only 12.50% of them do not use dictionaries. When analyzing the questionnaire, we noticed that the majority of students have both mono and bilingual dictionaries.

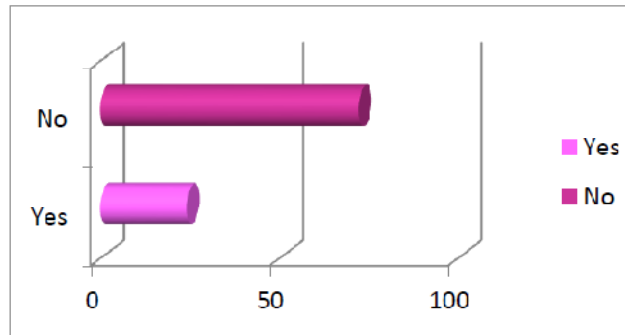
4/ Do your teachers of English use translation to explain new terms?

**Figure 3 :** Teachers' Use of Translation in the Classroom

The students of the three levels answered this question differently, 61.45% of them said that their teachers use translation in order to explain new terms to them while 38.54% of them said their teachers do not. Among those who said yes, the learners of the 1st and the 2nd year said that about 03 of their teachers use translation, while the learners of the third year claimed that only one of their teachers do. This means that only few teachers refer to this pedagogical tool for the purpose of introducing new terms to their students.

#### 4.2.3. translation and technology

1/ Do you find electronic translation trustworthy?

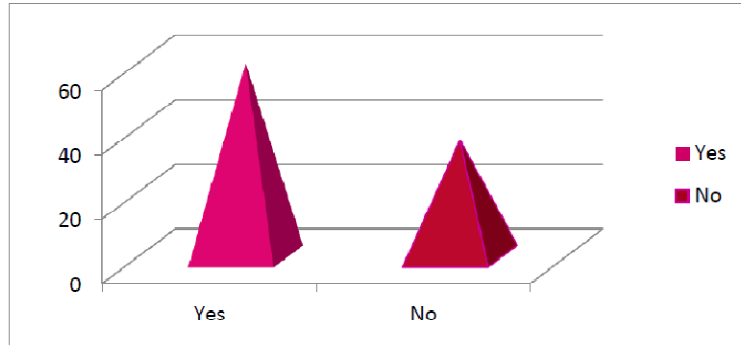
**Figure 4:** Trustiness of e-Translation

The results above reveal that the majority of EFL students (75%) do not trust electronic translation.

2/ List two famous translation software:

The answers of the participants show that half of them are aware of the different translation software (56.66%), while the others (43.34%) are not, some of them did not mention any translation software and the others stated only Google translation.

3/ Do you support learning by referring to subtitled videos?



**Figure 5:** The Support of Subtitled Videos in EFL Learning

From the results shown above, it seems that the majority of the students (62.50%) support learning through subtitled videos.

#### 4.3. Analysis of the activities

**First Activity:** a- Read carefully the passage then translate it to the standard Arabic language without referring to your dictionary.

b- Translate the passage again to the standard Arabic language using, your bilingual dictionary.

From the analysis of the quality of the translation done by the participants without and with the use of the bilingual dictionary, it can be noticed that the use of the dictionary helped the students of the first-year level more than the others.

1/ what have you learned from this activity?

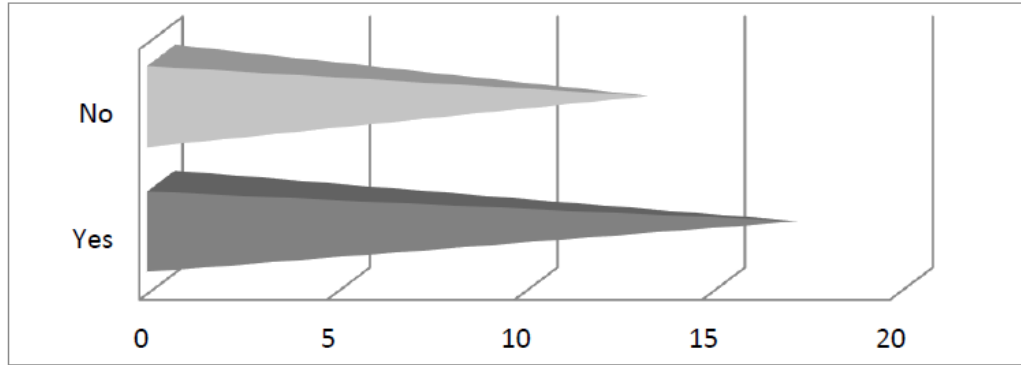
**Table 5:**  
*Knowledge Gained from the Activity*

Option	N°	%
New vocabulary	23	76.66%
New structure	09	30%
Knowledge	11	36.66%
New ideas	04	13.33%

Nothing	01	03.33%
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According to the answers of the participants, the majority of them benefited from the activity, especially vocabulary (76.66%). Only 03.33% of them said they learnt nothing from this activity.

2/ Did the use of the bilingual dictionary help you to do faster and effective translation?



**Figure 6:** Usefulness of Bilingual Dictionaries

As mentioned in the table below, the use of the bilingual dictionary helped the majority of the students to do better performance in the activity.

**Second Activity:** a. Translate the following proverb to the standard Arabic language using the Google translation website.  
b. Take the result as it is and try to translate it again from the standard Arabic Language back to the English language.

Are you satisfied with the results you came up with?

**Table 6:**

*Satisfaction of the Results of Google Translation*

Option	N°	%
Yes	02	06.66%
No	18	60%
Not sure	10	33.33%

The purpose of our study was to check the validity of the hypothesis concerning the use of translation as a tool for learning a language. From the classroom observation, it was noticed

that the students perform better when their mother tongue is included, also they depend on e-dictionaries more than the printed ones. Although some teachers seem to discourage the use of mother

tongue in the classroom, they sometimes refer to it when needed.

The answers of the participants show that the majority support translation and they like this pedagogical tool and that 62.50% encouraged learning through subtitled videos. The answers of the students also reflect the awareness of the majority of them about the different technology, advantages/ disadvantages of this tool.

The performance of the volunteers for the additional activities reveals the effectiveness of this tool, especially for the first-year students, and how beneficial can translation be when it is directed in form of practice. Both activities' feedback and the answers to the questionnaire show that the most strengthened skill by use of translation is the vocabulary.

#### 4.4. Discussion

Despite the availability of both printed and electronic dictionaries, the students rarely referred to them, and for the most of time waited for the teacher to do the translation himself. The reason why some students still trust the different electronic translation software-neglecting the poor quality of translation provided by this software may be the speed and simplicity of this technology.

The majority of students, who enjoyed the translation activities, were those of the 1st year maybe because they still beginners in EFL learning. This leads us to the fact that translation activities may be more appropriate for beginners rather than those of the

advanced levels. The flexibility of some teachers in the classroom, and the open mind of them towards the use of translation, made the learners feel at ease and interact better with their classmates and the teacher.

The good performance and interaction of the volunteers for the activities was a reflection of their readiness and acceptance of the translation method. According to this, the use of translation or other teaching methods depends on the needs and the level of the learners in the first place.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

Although translation is considered as an EFL learning/ teaching method, this latter remains controversial in the pedagogical environment. Although this pedagogical tool was the first method used for FL teaching/ learning, many teachers deny its value and try to omit the inclusion of translation in their teaching.

Including translation in the EFL teaching/ learning is mainly related to the needs of the learners and the nature of the lesson, because this tool cannot be completely isolated from the other pedagogical methods, and it also can serve specific language skills better than others like vocabulary or writing. Even though translation receives a great number of critics, this one can be useful for teaching EFL for beginners through the representation of the different language structures of both target and source language.

This study was conducted to investigate the value of this pedagogical tool and what can this later offer for EFL learning. Based on the findings, it turned out that, through translation, the students can give a better performance when dealing with authentic texts. The majority of the participants supported the use of this tool as a means of explanation. Well organized translation activities have a crucial role in increasing the students' knowledge, developing their thinking, and providing better students' involvement in the lesson.

On the other side, students must vary in their methods of learning EFL structures, and let the reference to translation the last resort they depend on, as much as they master the language. Translation is better employed for the first contact with the foreign language, indeed it is needed for EFL learning for the first time.

Furthermore, the use of the mother tongue can be regarded as an opportunity for beginners to express themselves in the classroom and compare the different language structures of the target language with those of their mother tongue. The addiction of translation for EFL learning can negatively affect the gaining of linguistic proficiency and keep the learner away from authenticity.

After the analysis of the results, guidelines concerning the different issues related to the method of translation and its involvement in the learning/teaching of EFL can be suggested:

1. Translation method should be applied most for beginners rather than advanced learners.
2. The teacher has to control the amount of referring to this method during class.
3. Some teachers should reflect flexibility towards all the pedagogical methods that serve the learners' needs, including translation.
4. Translation should be involved in the activities of vocabulary and literature lectures, to make the learner closer to the origins of the target language and provide him with the opportunity to compare it with his L1.
5. Teachers should encourage the use of printed dictionaries rather than electronic ones, or allow his students to use them under his control, so He can correct the misleading of this technology.

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