

## Overcoming the Dilemma of Using Translation within an EFL Classroom

## التغلب على معضلة استخدام الترجمة داخل فصل دراسي للغة الإنجليزية كلفة أجنبية

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DOI: 10.33705/1111-015-002-027: الرقم التعريفي للمقال

تاريخ القبول: 2021.12.10

تاريخ الاستلام: 2021.08.31

**Abstract :** ELT or English Language Teaching is considered a multidisciplinary domain. In other words, the study of ELT draws its principles with other disciplines including: psychology, sociology, technology, ethnography, educational psychology, applied linguistics, and translation. Most of the problems are related to the use of the mother tongue (L1) in an ELT course where the core of the process is the language used by both teachers and students. In addition to this, the use of French as a prerequisite contributes in the dilemma of the usefulness as to the limitations of using translation in an ELT class. The aim of this paper is to shed light on the issues mentioned. Besides, it will try to find solution to overcome the problematic situation regarding when, where, and how to make the shift to translation (be it to L1 or French), when teaching English in particular, of great value.

**Keywords :** EFL, Translation, Mother Tongue, L1, French

**المُلخَص:** يعتبر تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية أو تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية مجالاً متعدد التخصصات. بمعنى آخر ترسم دراسة ELT مبادئها مع التخصصات الأخرى بما في ذلك: علم النفس، وعلم الاجتماع، والتكنولوجيا والإثنوغرافيا وعلم النفس التربوي، واللغويات التطبيقية، والترجمة. ترتبط معظم المشكلات باستخدام اللغة الأم (L1) في دورة تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية حيث يكون جوهر العملية هو اللغة المستخدمة من قبل كل من المعلمين والطلاب. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، فإن استخدام اللغة الفرنسية كشرط أساسي يساهم في معضلة الفائدة من قيود استخدام الترجمة في فصل تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية. الهدف من هذه الورقة هو تسليط الضوء على القضايا المذكورة. إلى جانب ذلك، سيحاول إيجاد حل للتغلب على الموقف الإشكالي فيما يتعلق بوقت وأين وكيفية التحول إلى الترجمة (سواء كانت إلى L1 أو الفرنسية)، عند تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية على وجه الخصوص، ذات قيمة كبيرة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** اللغة الإنجليزية كلفة أجنبية، الترجمة، اللغة الأم، اللغة الأولى، اللغة الفرنسية.

**Introduction :** Translation is considered as an important part of the ELT enterprise for a long time, and then a significant missing point as well. Throughout history, and more precisely with the appearance and then the total dominance of communicative methodologies, the notion of translation was quickly condemned to the past, alongside other 'traditional' tools such as dictation, reading aloud and drills. Nevertheless, it and these other abandoned activities are now an element of many communicative classrooms and successful aids to learning, although the approach to using them has changed.

According to Duff (1989): *"teachers and students now use translation to learn, rather than learning translation"*. When it comes to the notion of translation activities usually used while teaching, many scholars argue that there is shift from L1 to L2. Despite the fact that the reverse path, i.e., a shift from L2 to L1 which is also used and can be seen in lessons with more specific aims, translating either from L1 to L2 or vice versa have noticeable objectives to fulfil such as: enhancing the communicative process, developing a highly cognitive as to metacognitive visions, motivating both teachers and students at different levels, and constructing important communicative results.

### 1. Translation in ELT context

As mentioned above, translation is rooted in the foundation of language teaching throughout history. However with the emergence of new methodologies and techniques; it is started to be less used and in some cases totally rejected. No one can neglect the fact that translation was a key element of the Grammar Translation Method (GTM), which was derived from the classical method of teaching Greek and Latin. Regarding GTM, it was seen as a negative learning experience as having learners memorizing huge lists of rules and vocabulary is quite boaring. Besides, the method involved learners in a process of translating whole literary or historic texts word for word.

Unsurprisingly, new methodologies attempts to improve on this paving the way for their existence. As a result, The Direct or Natural Method established in Germany and France around 1900 was a response to the obvious problems associated with the Grammar Translation Method.

The common core the Direct Method was built around was that both teachers and learners are highly requested not to use their native language but just the target one. In the same vein, the later Audio-Lingual Method took the idea of teaching the language directly without using the L1 to explain new items as its point of departure. Consequently, humanistic methodologies such as the Silent Way, Total Physical Response, and Communicative approaches moved even further away from the L1, and from these arise many of the objections to translation.

## 2. Translation in Language Teaching:

Starting from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it has been generally assumed that L2 should be taught without reference to the learners' L1. This conception became a popular belief amongst teachers that the translation of L1 gets in the way with the acquisition of L2.

Newson (1988) hypothesised that translation can be used either as a teaching or testing tool. four disadvantages push him to say that: (1) it encourages thinking in one language and transferring to another, with accompanying interference; (2) it deprives teacher and learner of the benefit of working within a single language; (3) it gives false belief of the idea that there is a perfect one-to-one correspondence between languages; and (4) it does not facilitate achievement of generally accepted aims such as emphasis on the spoken language.

Conversely, Carreres (2006) opposed what Newson said putting forward some arguments against using translation as a language teaching tool:

- ✓ Translation is an artificial exercise that has no place in a communicative methodology. Also, it is restrictive in that it confines language practice to two skills only: reading and writing.
- ✓ Translation into L2 is counterproductive in that it forces learners always to view the foreign language through their mother tongue; this causes interferences and a dependence on L1 that inhibits free expression in L2.
- ✓ Translation into L2 is a purposeless exercise that has no application in the real world, since translators normally operate into and not out of their mother tongue.
- ✓ Translation, particularly into L2, is a frustrating and de-motivating exercise in that the student can never attain the level of accuracy or stylistic polish of the version presented to

them by their teacher. It seems to be an exercise designed to elicit mistakes, rather than accurate use of language.

✓ Translation is a method that may well work with literary-oriented learners who enjoy probing the intricacies of grammar and lexis, but it is unsuited to the average learner.

Marsh, 1987, however argues the fact that translation is not a suitable exercise in the initial stages of learning. His idea was developed based on what has been argued on among educationalists that learners need to acquire a significant level of proficiency in the L2 language before they can tackle translation productively. As a result, they need to have moved beyond beginner's level. According to Owen (2003) the rationale against using translation is founded on obliging learners to share their precious L2 use time with the L1; this is not a productive use of the opportunities given by the class.

Despite the preceding arguments declared against the notion of translation in teaching, there are, if fact, strong arguments which endeavour it. The following part will shed light on them. First, as an opposite perspective, no one can neglect the fact that translation was misconceived and overused for the simple reason that it could be seen as a victim of the grammar-translation method, rather than the foundation of its evils.

Yet, the problem was not in translation itself, but in the existing practices or the teaching methodology which separated language from its communicative function. Undeniably, translation itself as it takes place in the real world is essentially linked to a communicative purpose. As Duff (1989: 6) puts it, "translation happens everywhere, all the time, so why not in the classroom?"

So far, the outcomes of the aggressive reactions against the grammar-translation method in teaching languages were a complete discredit of translation itself as a teaching tool. In other words, what was wrong with the GTM was not the use of translation, but rather how badly it was used. According to Titford (1985: 78) Learners of a foreign language do refer to their mother tongue to aid the process of acquisition of L2 or, in other words they "translate silently". In this respect, translation into L2 can help them systematize and rationalize a learning apparatus that is taking place anyway.

When it come to the argument that learners will never need to translate into L2 in their practical life, logically speaking one can say that it is directly linked to an ideal situation rather than a description of actual practice. Perhaps It is true that native command of the target language is a prerequisite when translating a text. But, in reality, EFL learners need to translate into L2 to prepare them for what they might find outside the context of classroom, i.e., real live or targeted situations.

The idea that translation is a motivating activity has been supported by many researchers. Carreres (2006), for example, conducted a questionnaire and came to the conclusion that learners overwhelmingly perceive the translation exercises they were exposed to as useful for language learning. Consequently, it was in response to student feedback that he decided to introduce translation more substantially in language classes. He added that translation, by its very nature, is an activity that invites discussion and students are only too happy to contribute to it, often defending their version with remarkable passion and persuasiveness.

Moreover, Lavault (1985) pointed out that one of the reasons quoted by teachers to explain their use of translation in the classroom was that students asked for this exercise and enjoyed it, too. Similarly, Conacher (1996) reported excellent student response to a translation course. Hervey et al. (2002) also gathered enthusiastic feedback from the students attending her translation course at the University of St Andrew's in Scotland.

It has been mentioned in the previous discussion that translation ought to be introduced to advanced levels but not for beginners. As far as this point, Carreres (2006) views translation activities as forming a continuum between the extremes of literal, explicative translation and that of communicative translation as it takes place in the professional world. The former denotes that translation into L1 is merely an effective tool to help learners grasp a particular L2 structure. As a result, stylistic considerations are set aside. The latter synthesises that the focus is to be put on the communicative value of a given text. All of which facilitate the task for Learners who are expected to produce a text that could function in the L2 culture. Both approaches, provided they are carefully applied, have their place in the languages classroom and they should be viewed as mutually enhancing rather than exclusive.

Another point to mention here is the way or even the ways translation is taught. Malmkjaer (1998) argues that translation, if taught in a way that resembles the real life activity of translating, can bring into play the four basic language skills and yield benefits in L2 acquisition. He adds that some recent thinking on language learning has stressed the potential of translation as a means of language learning, if the process is regarded as the development of multi-linguistic competence. All of which help develop the communicative competence amongst learners.

In the same line with what has been said above, Shiyab and Abdullateef (2001) consider translation extremely important for foreign language teaching simply because it allows conscious learning and control of the foreign language, and as a result, it reduces native language interference. Accordingly, using translation can make learning meaningful as the learner is an active participant in the process. Thus, Translation has also been used to teach grammar. In this respect, teachers can show students equivalent and non-equivalent structures between L1 and L2.

Many studies suggested a positive and facilitative role of translation (Newmark 1991; Husain 1994; Kern 1994; Omura 1996). Recent research in pragmatics also suggests that greater awareness of L1 helps in the more effective communicative use of L2. Translation is a means by which both languages can be assessed. Rather than being seen as an obstacle to real language use, translation might more effectively be viewed as a way of fine-tuning the language to be used in given situations and conditions (Owen, 2003).

Liao (2006) summarizes the positive aspects of using translation: (1) it can help students comprehend L2; (2) it can help students to check whether their comprehension is correct; (3) it eases memory constraints in memorizing more words, idioms, grammar, and sentence structures; (4) it can help students develop and express ideas in another language; and (5) it can help reduce learning anxiety and enhance motivation to learn L2. In summary, the arguments for using translation in the language classroom outweigh the arguments against it.

## The Case under Investigation

When looking to the historical background and more precisely the colonial period of Algeria which lasted more than 130 years, French is the main actor. The dominance of that language is part of the linguistic situation in Algeria. Though having no official status, French is widely used at different levels. First, the governmental level either spoken (by the ministers and even the president in their speech delivered to Algerians!!) or written (whole and sometimes headings of documents). Second, the cultural level especially using French in the daily speech (what is called code mixing). Third the media level either spoken (channels delivering their programs in that language) or written (daily newspapers such as Quotidian D'Oran, El Watan, El Moudjahid etc). The last level- the main concern of this discussion- is education where French is integrated in all stages of education starting from the primary school, the middle, secondary, and higher education. In sum French is seen as being a de facto co-official language of Algeria.

In recent methodologies underlying the ELT enterprise, many teachers and theorists see the validity and reliability of using translation as an activity in communicative classrooms (although few course book writers offer ideas and materials for this area). Below are some of the ways translations can have a positive impact; many of these also serve as responses to the objections and criticisms expressed above:

- ❖ Designed well, translation activities in the classroom can practise the 4 skills and the 4 systems. In terms of communicative competence, they require accuracy, clarity and flexibility. Duff: it 'trains the reader to search (flexibility) for the most appropriate words (accuracy) to convey what is meant (clarity)'.
- ❖ Following on from this, translation is by its nature a highly communicative activity; the challenge is to make sure that the content being communicated is relevant and that we exploit all possibilities for communication during the activity.
- ❖ Translation in groups can encourage learners to discuss the meaning and use of language at the deepest possible levels as they work through the process of understanding and then looking for equivalents in another language.

❖ Translation is a real-life, natural activity and increasingly necessary in a global environment. Many learners living in either their own countries or a new one need to translate language on a daily basis, both informally and formally. This is even more important with the growing importance of online information.

❖ Whether we encourage it or not, translation is a frequently used strategy for learners; if we accept this, we need to support them in developing this skill in the right way, e.g. by discussing its role.

❖ Translation can be a support for the writing process, especially at lower levels. Research has shown that learners seem able to access more information in their own L1, which they can then translate.

❖ Discussion of differences and similarities during the translation process helps learners understand the interaction of the two languages and the problems caused by their L1. It also helps learners appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of the L1 and L2, for example in the comparison of idiomatic language such as metaphors.

❖ Teachers can focus translation activities on highly specific learning aims, such as practice of certain vocabulary, grammar points, styles and registers, etc. It also lends itself well to work with other tools such as e-mail and class web pages.

❖ Finally, for many learners developing skills in translation is a natural and logical part of reaching higher levels, and being able to do this well is highly motivating.

### Conclusion

Translation as part of the communicative ELT classroom approach is still a controversial area and one that provokes strong opinions. Translation as a method of language teaching is still a subject under research and continues to be one of the most frequently discussed topics among teachers of English. In our opinion, this activity should be considered in a wider range of situations than is currently the case. It can be used for language practice and improvement in a similar manner to role play, project work and conversation. This paper has attempted to show that translation can be introduced purposefully and imaginatively into the language learning programme.

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