

Translation as a Tool for Teaching English as a Second Language

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Abstract

The role of translation in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom has been a controversial issue. Supporters of the bilingual approach suggest that the use of L1 in L2 classroom helps students to learn L2 more effectively, whereas supporters of the monolingual approach state that the use of the target language solely in L2 classroom facilitates the learning of the target language and stimulates the students' thinking as well as proficiency in L2. This paper discusses the extent to which instructors at Ajloun and Irbid university colleges use Arabic in English classrooms. It also discusses the usefulness of using translation and the situations where it is useful in language learning and teaching. The study concludes that most instructors opt for using translation as it is effective in some situations; mainly in clarifying new vocabulary, discussing grammatical issues, teaching idiomatic expressions, explaining reading passages, comparing and contrasting between L1 and L2 as well as checking the students' reading and listening comprehension.

Keywords : Translation in EFL, teaching English, foreign language

1. Introduction

The use of translation in the EFL and ESL classrooms has and will continue to be a controversial issue. Some teachers and researchers have negative attitudes towards the use of translation in L2 teaching and learning whereas others have positive attitudes towards it as they believe that it facilitates the teaching learning process. The technological revolution that invades the world has changed everything around us. Thus, translation becomes necessary for clarifying the meaning of new technical terms that may facilitate how to deal with new inventions. Garcia (2005) demonstrates that the position of translation training /learning in the global society is affected by the new technology roles. These roles influence the objectives of second / foreign language learning. Wang (2005) argues that the integration of internet technology is inevitable in classrooms as it " demonstrates the shift in educational paradigms from a behavioural to a constructivist learning approach."

Regardless of the technological revolution, some researchers do not prefer the use of translation in language teaching and learning due to the fact that it has many disadvantages. Newson (1988) argued that translation as a teaching and learning tool has four disadvantages: It stimulates thinking in one language and transferring to another, deprives both teacher and learner of working within a single language, provides false belief of the idea that there is a perfect one-to-one correspondence between languages and it does not facilitate achievement of generally accepted aims such as emphasis on the spoken language.

1.1 Purpose of the study

The study attempts to shed light on:

- The effects of using translation in teaching and learning a second language.
- Situations in which translation can be effective in language teaching and learning.
- The extent to which teachers of English as a second language refer to the learners' mother tongue in L2 classroom.

1.2 Statement of the problem

Some teachers and researchers support the idea that translation plays a facilitative role in language teaching and learning. Others oppose the idea and consider it as a time consuming process. Therefore, the current study is an attempt to identify the extent to which instructors at Ajloun and Irbid university colleges use translation in EFL classroom and how often do they use it. In addition, it examines the situations in which it can be effective in language teaching and learning.

1.3 Significance of the study

Regardless the fact that teachers of English as a foreign language are divided between supporters and opposers of the use of translation in the EFL classroom, It remains a helpful tool in the case that it is used appropriately and purposefully.

1.4 Questions of the study

1. What are the attitudes of university instructors towards the use of translation in language teaching (TILT) ?
2. When can the use of TILT be more positive or negative ?
3. How can teachers make translation more effective in language teaching and learning ?

1.5 Hypothesis

Translation can play an effective role to facilitate teaching and learning a second language . There are many opponents and proponents for this idea and each part has his own reasons .

2. Literature Review

The role of the learners' mother tongue L1 in the ESL/EFL classroom has become the focus of an on-going debate and research . The monolingual approach emphasises that the use of the target language only in L2 classroom increases the learning of the target language . However, the bilingual approach suggests that it provides one –to-one correspondence and it might deprive learners of valuable input in L2 (Bouangeune2009 ; Ellis1985;Auerbach 1993).

Lan (2008) points that translation from L1 to L2 offers an opportunity for learners to apply what they have learned before –such as , vocabulary and sentence structure – into practical use . However, words , phrases, collocations and grammar are communicative tools for learners to convey the writer's original meanings .

Bearing in mind that translation is a process , it includes listening and speaking skills since there is a teacher students' interaction and discussion . Leonardi (2010) states that translation task could also includes sight translation and interpreting practice . Moreover, if it is designed properly translation can be used to enhance the four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking as well as to develop accuracy , clarity and flexibility (Duff,1994) .

Some researchers such as Ross (2000) consider translation as the fifth skill alongside of the four other skills , thus , it can be an effective tool to develop and improve communicative competence . Cook (2010) suggests that" being able to translate is a major component of bilingual communicative competence ."

Butzkamm and Caldwell (2009) state that using the native language in the classroom is "the greatest pedagogical resource " and can enhance learners' confidence and focus on meaning . Ali (2012) also points out that translation stimulates learners of a foreign language to view L2 through their native language so L2 learners always have a natural tendency to use translation and they either consciously or unconsciously compare both languages involved in the teaching learning process .

Thus , it is meaningless to ignore the learners' internal thinking in L1 and code- switching between L1 and L2 as it is considered as a natural behaviour . Kavaliauskiene and Kaminskene (2007) point out that translation does not necessarily cause negative interference by the native language and it does not hinder FL learning at all . On the contrary , it increases students' awareness of similarities and differences between the two languages , it also promotes their acquisition of difficult structures and elements in the FL .

Pan and Pan (2012) emphasize that translation " assists student to elude the interference of the mother tongue on the first step and then further enhance their L2 learning" .Learners are very dependent on their L1 especially at the beginning stage of learning a second language. Widdowson (2003) states in this regard " teachers try to keep the two languages separate , the learners in their own minds keep the two in contact " .

Heltai (1989) suggests that translation should be used when it is an end in itself; when English is a foreign language and not a second language; with students at an advanced level of language ability; for adults who prefer conscious learning; when formal correctness is important and the students are actively interested in acquiring this formality; and when the teacher shares the same L1 as the students.

Although some teachers and scholars prefer the use of translation in L2 classroom , others reject that and consider it as not useful . Harbord (1992) emphasizes that the use of translation may lead to the development of an excessive dependency on the students' mother tongue . Consequently , students may lose confidence in their ability to communicate in L2and they may feel that the only way to understand anything the teacher says is to translate it to their mother tongue .

Moreover, students may opt for using their mother tongue even if they are capable of expressing the same idea in L2 . This may reduce the students' opportunity to practice L2 and students may not realize that using L2 in classroom activities is necessary for improving their language skills . Malkmjaer(1998) states that the use of translation encourages thinking in one language as well as it does not allow achievement of generally accepted teaching aims .

Some other common criticisms to the use of translation in the classroom emphasize that translation has a specialized nature ; it helps to have a narrow set of skills, and it ends with a false idea of “equivalence” between two languages. Newson (1988) criticizes the use of translation in the college classroom by arguing that it is an art that should be taught in specialized institutions. In addition , he mentions many reasons for why translation

has to be excluded from the language syllabus: the interferences appears in thinking in one language and transferring the thought to another, the difficulty in dealing with two languages instead of one, the enforcement of the belief that there is a direct correspondence between languages as well as the minimization of practicing L2 in the classroom .

Carreres (2006) summarizes the main arguments against the use of translation in the modern languages curriculum as : 1) translation stimulates activities related to only two skills (reading and writing); 2) it encourages students to think about L2 through the prism of the source language; 3) it has no real world application; 4) it creates more mistakes than accurate responses; 5) it is good for literary and grammar oriented students than for the average learner.

The attitudes against the use of L1 are the main concerns in the area of L2 learning Cook(2001) finds the use of L2 as positive and the use of L1 as negative in the environment where learners should be exposed to L2 as much as possible. Duff and Polio (1990) also claim that the amount of L2 use in the L2 classroom is essential for the development of L2 mainly when there is little chance for learners to be exposed to L2 outside the classroom as it is the only time and place for the learners to be exposed to L2. Furthermore, many other scholars (e.g., Auerbach, 1993; Ellis, 1985) also argue that L2 learning requires as much exposure to L2 as possible within a limited time, so that learners can have good opportunity to communicate in L2 and to start to “think in English” (Auerbach, 1993).

Turnbull (2001) claims that instructors should use L2 as much as possible in the L2 class setting so that learners can practice L2 as their primary language. In addition, Cook (2003) introduces “the separation model” which emphasizes the fact that each language has its own system. This model supports the idea that L2 should be taught only in L2 with no trace of L1 so that the learners can form their new L2 system.

Newson (1998) provides a summary of the main objections for the use of translation in L2 teaching and learning . Translation, he states, “does not allow or make easy the achievement of such generally accepted foreign language teaching aims as” (1) fluency in spoken language, (2) the controlled introduction of selected and graded structures and lexical items, or (3) the controlled introduction of communicative strategies. Translation leads to no observable learning effect, either of new vocabulary or structural items, and does not foster communicative language use.

3. The Study

3.1 The Sample

This study was conducted at 22 instructors who teach English as a second language at Ajloun and Irbid university colleges . All the sample are native speakers of Arabic.

3.2 Methodology

The present study is divided into two parts : theoretical and practical . The theoretical part is covered by the survey of literature, while the practical one is handled through a questionnaire that was given to 22 instructors . The questionnaire is divided into four parts ; personal information , frequency of using translation in language learning and teaching, the effectiveness of using translation in L2 learning and teaching as well as the areas in which instructors can use translation in language learning and teaching. The instructors' responses were collected and calculated as shown in table 1,2 , 3 and 4.

Table 1

Qualifications and teaching experience of the sample

Qualification	Years of experience	Numbers of instructors
Phd in English	1 – 5	4
	6- 10	4
M.A in English	1 – 5	6
	6- 10	8

Table 2

Frequency of using translation in language learning and teaching

Question	Always		Sometimes		Rarely		Never	
	F	P	F	P	F	P	F	P
How often do you use translation in language learning and teaching ?	4	18.182%	15	68.182%	3	13.636%	0	0

F = frequency

P = Percentage

Table 3

The effectiveness of using translation in language learning and teaching .

Question	Yes		No	
	F	P	F	P
Is it effective to use translation in language learning and teaching ?	12	54.545%	10	45.454%

F = frequency P = Percentage

Table 4

Areas where teachers may use translation in language learning and teaching

Areas	Always		Sometimes		Rarely		Never	
	F	P	F	P	F	P	F	P
Giving instructions	3	13.636%	18	81.818%	1	4.546%	0	0
Clarifying new words and phrases	2	9.091%	19	86.363%	1	4.546%	0	0
Explaining grammatical issues	1	4.546%	16	72.727%	5	22.727%	0	0
Teaching idiomatic and culture bound expressions	10	45.454%	12	54.545%	0	0	0	0
Giving feedback to students about their performance	0	0	3	13.636%	14	63.637%	5	22.727%
Explaining reading passages	3	13.636%	13	59.091%	4	18.182 %	2	9.091%
Dealing with errors related to L1 interference	9	40.909%	10	45.454%	2	9.091%	1	4.546%
Comparing and contrasting between L1 and L2	10	45.454%	9	40.909%	2	9.091%	1	4.546%
Checking the students' reading and listening comprehension	7	31.818%	12	54.545%	2	9.091%	1	4.546%
Explaining classroom activities	13	59.091%	6	27.273	3	13.636%	0	0

F = frequency P = Percentage

3.3 Findings and Discussion

It is concluded from table 2 that all instructors use translation in language learning and teaching with various degrees ; 18.182% always use translation , 68.182 sometimes use translation and 13.636 rarely use translation .This means that most instructors sometimes opt for translation in language learning and teaching . Moreover , it is inferred from table 3 that instructors are divided between supporters and opposers of the use of translation in language learning and teaching . The table shows that 54.545% of the instructors use translation whereas 45.454% of them do not use it .

Furthermore, It is figured out from table 4 that the most popular areas in which instructors use translation are the following :

They always use translation in comparing and contrasting between L1 and L2 with a percentage of 45.454% . In this sense , Garces(1998) points out that by comparing and contrasting L2 learners gradually begin to notice particular differences in the grammatical structures between L1 and L2 , such as the passive voice and the conditional clauses as well as differences in the pragmatic aspects .

Moreover, Instructors always use translation in explaining classroom activities with a percentage of 59.091% and they sometimes use it in giving instructions with a percentage of 81.818% . In this sense , Dorney (2001) comments that the criteria for the successful completion of an activity needs to be explicitly clear to all learners although for some a discussion about these will not be enough .

In addition , instructors sometimes opt for translation in clarifying new words with a percentage of 86.363% . This is clarified in a research carried out by Hummel (2010) as well as Laufer and Girsai (2008), who report on the influence of the native language on the acquisition of new vocabulary and suggest that translation could be a useful cognitive strategy in FL vocabulary learning.

Translation is also used in explaining grammatical issues with a percentage of 72.727% . In this sense , Chellapan (1982) explains that this way of using translation involves a conscious process of learning. Through translation, a learner can be aware of the distinctiveness of similar structures in the two languages, and also of the different processes used in conveying the same message.

Moreover, the sample responses show that translation is a tool for teaching idiomatic and culture bound expressions with a percentage of 54.545% . Titford (1983) implies that L2 learners can identify similar collocations and idiomatic phrases in their L1 more easily , in addition , they become aware of the difference in literal and / or figurative meaning .

The findings also show that translation is used in explaining reading passages with a percentage of

59.091% . Kern (1994) found that mental translation during L2 reading played "an important and multidimensional role in the L2 reading comprehension processes" of the students .

In addition , translation is used in dealing with errors related to L1 interference with a percentage of 45.454% , and this is compatible with Pan and Pan (2012) who suggests that TILT does not necessarily cause negative interference by the native language, and it does not hinder FL learning at all. On the contrary, it increases students' awareness of similarities and differences between the two languages, promoting their acquisition of difficult structures and elements in the FL and it "assists students to elude the interference of the mother tongue on the first step and then further enhance their L2 learning"

Furthermore , instructors opt for translation to check the students' reading and listening comprehension with a percentage of 54.545% . With this regard , Liao (2006) reports that students mostly used their mother tongue to expand their English knowledge of vocabulary, structures, expressions, and to improve three language skills of reading, writing, and speaking. Moreover it can help the learners to check their comprehension of different tasks, especially reading and listening ones .

The only area in which instructors rarely use translation is in giving feedback for students about their performance with a percentage of 63.637% .

4. Conclusion

Translation is a beneficial and effective tool in teaching a second language . Teachers of a second language should be aware not to overuse it in L2 classroom in order to give L2 learners an opportunity to think about and use L2 . It is important to bear in mind the main areas in which translation can be useful are summarized in : clarifying new words and phrases , explaining grammatical issues , teaching idiomatic and culture bound expressions , explaining reading passages , dealing with errors related to L1 interference , checking the students' reading and listening comprehension as well as explaining classroom activities .

In addition , teachers should make translation as the last option and need to encourage students to figure out the meaning from context . Moreover , when teachers find it is necessary to opt for translation they should have in mind that they and their students share the same L1 .

5. Suggestions

1. Teachers should not over use translation in L2 classes that may lead both the teachers and learners to forget the semantic and pragmatic features of L1 and L2 .
2. It is important for teachers to encourage students to figure the meaning out of context in order to avoid L1 interference that may lead to irrelevant equivalences of L1 terms in L2 .
3. Teachers have to opt for translation in L2 classes just to simplify materials that seem to be difficult for L2 students to understand .
4. Teachers may opt for translation in L2 classes when they and their students have the same L1 .

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