

Issues Regarding the Implementation of Translation in English Language Teaching

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Abstract

There are several attitudes towards utilizing translation in teaching a foreign language (in our case English language), but as recent studies have shown, a considerable amount of teachers, teacher trainees and teacher trainers rely on it during the teaching and learning processes. Taking into consideration the fact that the advantages of using translation as a teaching device outweigh the disadvantages, an attempt to formally implement it with students of Fan S. Noli University was made. This paper focuses on the results derived from making such practice part of syllabuses of two different study programs with the view of highlighting difficulties, benefits and misconceptions encountered during the process. The study programs were purposely chosen with no immediate relation between them in order to have results derived by two different groups of users. By means of analyzing the data collected via questionnaires distributed to the students, two main contradictory attitudes will be brought into attention. Moreover, reasons underlying the gap between the attitudes students showed regarding the beneficial aspect of using translation in teaching English as a foreign language will be discussed. Also, among others, the necessity to implement such practice into the curriculum of future English teachers will be emphasized, regarding it as the leading group from where further practice will be carried out in the lower levels of Education.

Keywords: EFL, translation practice, skills' developments, avoidance, cognitive aspects

Introduction

Many studies are carried out regarding the use of translation in EFL teaching and various advantages and disadvantages have been highlighted. On behalf of Communicative Language Approach, teachers of English language, teacher trainers and, consequently, teacher trainees have continuously struggled to stay far from its utilization during the teaching process. Strangely enough, though, the more they try to avoid this practice, the more they feel the necessity to use it. Anyways, being constantly under the pressure of the above mentioned approach, teachers very often either deny employing it or at the most, they refer to it as an 'unintentional mistake'. The same practice is followed in universities, especially due to students' general knowledge of English. However, we are aware of the fact that there are auditoriums with students possessing a mixed level of English language knowledge and as such, generalization is not appropriate while planning and teaching. What is more, despite the fact that students' knowledge of English (or any other foreign language) might restrict its use, practice has shown that there is always room for translation to be utilized while teaching in order to facilitate language acquisition. Yet, as Al-Nofaie (2010) highlights, students' knowledge and teachers' professional experience greatly affect the amount of L1 (own language) teachers use.

As it has already been mentioned, the paper focuses on two different study programs with the view of studying the advantages of utilizing translation with students who learn English language as future foreign language teachers and others who are going to employ it only for personal use and special purposes. When seen from this aspect, these two groups of students don't have much in common: the aim of their study, their knowledge level and the expected results are some of the differences to be mentioned. Anyway, they have a big common point: they are learning English as a foreign language.

The study is carried out by means of questionnaires distributed to the students of both study programs and the qualitative data analysis is used in order to identify students' reactions and give reasons to justify them combining, thus, content analysis with narrative and discourse one. The results are discussed further and in order to avoid listing the open-ended questions asked to the students and detailed explanation of each answer, we will focus on the yielded results.

Misconceptions, difficulties

Foreign language teachers have at least some times during their teaching experience made use of translation. This phenomenon might have been a result of various factors, each of them important in its way. Due to the notorious association of L1 with GTM (Grammar Translation Method), many of them feel bad, if not ashamed for doing it. In their view, implementing such practice not only makes you a 'weak teacher' and a 'bound to fail student', but as Newson (1998) notes, it also gives them the false belief that word-for-word equivalence between languages exists or that similar structural and lexical sentences in two languages mean the same. (Baker 1993) Other researchers are of the opinion that another reason keeping teachers far from utilizing translation in language teaching is the belief that it reduces the L2 use, limiting valuable practice. (Cook 2001; Turnbull 2001; Baker 1993; Kerr 2019). Being taught under the effects of Communicative Language Teaching Approach (CLTA) makes it impossible for the teachers to find reasons to justify their use of L1 during EFL classes. (Cook 2001; Turnbull 2001)

The main difficulty in implementing translation in syllabuses is going against CLTA which has been for long the most favourable teaching approach among educators. Anyways, it is worth mentioning the fact that even though Levine (2011) claims that utilizing students' own language in the classroom is 'marked' by many researchers, Lee and Macaro (2013) are of the opinion that this approach is in favour of intra-lingual practice as it counts for the major part of the communicative bilingual competence. (Cook 2010)

Being taught English by teachers with the above mentioned attitudes towards L1 use in English language classes, most of the students have hosted and are in favour of the same approach. This attitude became one of the difficulties encountered while implementing translation in their syllabuses. Constant pressure from the outer parties (lecturers who are against such practice, families, hosting schools, peer pressure) in favour of communicative language benefits make students show hesitation towards translation use. Anyways, talking and exchanging ideas and experiences from the past as well as combining the necessity for using translation with its practice (where necessary) made students of English Language Teaching Study Program change their attitudes and surpass their expectations.

Two study programs-two attitudes

According to Stibbard (1998), (and to many other researchers) English is a lingua franca employed while travelling, trading, making deals and a lot of other activities carried out in any international context. In this context, the students of Business Administration, Marketing and Management study programs were more interested in making use of their translation skills to achieve satisfactory results. As many teachers of ESP have for sure noticed, it is a useful device which facilitates learners' cognitive skills providing this user group with the meaning of different words/phrases as well as a handy means of reducing the feeling of what Cook (1991) refers to as 'indeterminacy' the inexperienced user might have. Likewise, referring to the answers on the questionnaires, it was observed that most of the students of the ESP classes were in favor of utilizing translation to learn English. They listed various reasons all of which are directly related to their classroom practice. One of the reasons mentioned was the fact that the time spent in trying to explain meanings of the words related to specific cultural phenomena, jargons, or specific functional words could be used for their further practice in linguistic activities. Almost all of them agreed that this practice was a means of ambiguity avoidance, concrete examples application during the classes, contrasting L1-L2 cases and of providing insightful explanations. They shared the opinion that analysis of very specific language is rare, while new cultural phenomena, as well as key functional concepts are better understood if L1 is used. Another advantage of translation use is the ability to give hints and warnings on various practices followed by native users which would be better if avoided.

Anyways, the pre-service teachers were mainly against the implementation of translation in their classes and argued that translating what they are explained by the lecturer during class not only is unnecessary but it also, as stated even by Mackdonald (1993), fades the process of learning as future teachers. What is more, they saw the implementation of L1 in the class as a form of neglecting the necessity for practicing L2. Strangely, though, students with a very good level of language knowledge were more open towards this practice and willing to cherish some moments of L1 use on topics not related to school. This leads us to Cook's (1991) statement that translation is beneficial even to 'expert users'. Likewise, most of them, though very careful and hesitating in their actions, agreed that utilizing translation in giving small hints on how to remember various phenomena and even on how to implement them in their future life (while teaching) was very helpful, especially in avoiding ambiguities and saving time.

It is worth mentioning the fact that the students of the English Study Program were more judgmental towards practicing translation during their classes (due to their proficiency in English language) but much more open-minded when utilizing it while teaching English to their future pupils/students was concerned. They brought into focus reasons mostly related to their past experiences as pupils/students going through their own educators' a low and high level of education.

The 'prosperity' of translation as a practice in EFL teaching/learning

As already mentioned in the introductory paragraphs, the formal implementation of translation in the syllabuses of the study programs in question and its actual employment during lectures and seminars has been a process where various attitudes and reactions have been noticed. It was our intention to reveal mostly this aspect of the process than to make a simple analysis and listing of the answers yielded by the questionnaires.

While its introduction was a 'breath of fresh air' to the learners of ESP what we actually found difficult was the ability to limit its use to the borders of necessity. In this aspect, it was noticed that these students simply refused to try making deductions or assumptions on various contexts relying only to the translation part as the handiest tool ready to rescue them. Moreover, it was noticed a wide tendency to finish the exercises found in the books (ESP books have very few exercises and limited explanations) and bring to the classes various documents and work on translating them. As much as successful this could be considered, referring to the tendency we nowadays have to inflict on students the desire to learn for life, it was found a useful means to train students in limiting their relying on translation when not necessary and further practicing English. Just the fact that they knew they could rely on translation whenever they 'really' could not find another way out made them more relaxed and confident in what they were expected to do.

Regarding the second group of students, it should be mentioned that the introduction of 'translation' as a practice during classes was not the easiest one. It is logical that the necessity to be employed was far lesser than with the former group, but it was still useful for many reasons. Students were shown a number of activities suggested by Davies (2004) which they could later utilize while teaching their own pupils/students. This, combined with limited but fruitful translation use during classes greatly changed their attitude towards the practice in question. Anyways, what meaningfully changed their general opinion was their own experience which will later on help them build their own teaching 'style'.

Elimination of frightening or boring English classes leading to embarrassing situations, avoidance of ambiguous words and phrases as well as of boring lessons and saving the precious time during classes for L2 practice were some of the reasons these students stated in favor of utilizing translation during the teaching/learning process. Moreover, they shared the opinion that very specific linguistic analysis, new rare cultural phenomena, as well as key functional concepts were better understood if L1 is used. Likewise, ¾ of the students claimed that hints and warnings on various practices are better acquired by learners when conveyed in their own language. The last of the reasons in favor of translation use in the classes was its ability to do what Cook (2010) refers to as 'bridging cultural differences' which were in some experienced even by them during our classes despite their proficiency in English.

On the other hand, there were students who preferred to stay within the limits of an intra-lingual teaching approach in order to avoid dull, uninteresting classes and 'copy-paste' situations. (The ones teachers usually use while explaining topics related to grammar from year to year due to their becoming engraved in their long-term memories.)

Translation is an eminently communicative activity which can bridge the linguistic and cultural barriers (Tudor 1987) and as such, its implementation is a means of bringing various user groups closer to native contexts and helping them overcome most if not every relevant difficulty in acquiring the right meaning of the text in L2. It is the 'fifth skill' (Newmark 1991; Stibbard 1998) very much necessary for a full understanding and successful communication process as well as for the general development of the main skills.

Conclusions

As can be seen from the above discussions, students had different ideas towards the implementation of translation in EFL teaching. Each of them justified by their earlier practice or actual point of view as well as by their expectations and purposes for learning it.

The specifications pointed out by the students of English study program were ones made by future teachers and their positioning themselves far from the ESP students was logical and well-justified.

It should be noted that the 'gap' between the two different groups of students is not, indeed, a real gap. It is merely the result of deductions made from different points of view belonging to two different EFL learners with specific, diverse expectancies and with miscellaneous future goals in life.

Translation is an important tool in the EFL teaching which has different advantages for different user groups. Anyway, its use should be well planned and justified in order not to overdue it. It should work in favour of CLIL and not reduce users' chances to develop their communicative competence.

Sometimes students' role as judges in assessing various teaching procedures is impressive as much as it is objective because it derives from their own experience.

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