

# **Using Translation in Foreign Language Classrooms: Examining its Effectiveness in Teaching Vocabulary to EFL Students**

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**Abstract:** The use of mother tongue in foreign language classes has been a controversial issue in the history of language teaching. The purpose of this study is to examine the effectiveness of using L1 in teaching vocabulary to EFL students. To do so, 72 participants (36 boys and 36 girls) were divided into 6 classes in three levels based on their language proficiency, namely beginner, elementary and pre-intermediate. The students in each level were randomly assigned to control and experimental groups. In order to measure the effect of using L1 on their vocabulary learning, the control and experimental groups were taught for 20 sessions through the use of different methods. In the experimental groups, after teaching the new words through images and pictures, students' L1 was used to tell the students the Persian meaning(s) of the words, while in the control group, the Persian meanings were not told to the students and only the target language and visuals were used for teaching the new words. The students' performance in the posttest at the end of the class was compared using T-test. The finding indicated that the students in the experimental groups had a significantly better performance than that of the students in the control groups which substantiated the positive effect of using L1 in EFL classrooms.

**Keywords:** Translation in language teaching, vocabulary learning, L1, EFL learners.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Using students' mother tongue in English Language Teaching (ELT) classes has always been a controversial issue in language teaching. Generally, the use of translation in foreign language classes can be divided into three eras, including, its heydays during Grammar Translation Method (GTM), its total rejection by the emergence of the Direct Method, and its recent revival as an asset that can facilitate the process of language teaching and learning (Cook, 2010). During the GTM era, it was believed that translation was an important means and also an end for teaching a language. After that time, by the advent of the Direct Method which is also called 'monolingual' or 'intralingual' method, it was believed that any use of the mother tongue in

foreign/second language classrooms can cause interference and hinder the process of language learning, so only the target language should be used in the classroom and using students' mother tongue should be prohibited (Lado, 1964).

However, following the rejection of the psychological and linguistic assumptions underlying the Direct Method, some scholars argued that the rejection of translation in language classrooms has not been based on scientific evidence, and contrary to what has been assumed, a 'judicious' use of translation in language classrooms can help learners to 'focus on form' and facilitate the process of language learning (Cook, 2001; Cook, 2007; Cook, 2010; Malmkjær, 2004; Pym, 2016; Pym, Malmkjær & Gutiérrez, 2013).

At the same time, the concept of translation has been conceived differently by different scholars. One of the most important categorization which is the theoretical base of this study, was presented by Jakobson (1959). According to him, there are three kinds of translations; namely, 'interlingual', 'intralingual', and 'intersemiotic' translation. Based on his categorization, 'interlingual' translation takes place between two different languages. On the other hand, 'intralingual' translation is paraphrasing the text within the same language for specific purposes. 'Intersemiotic' translation is also a kind of translation in which the signs of a verbal system is transferred to the signs of a non-verbal system. For instance, teaching the meaning of new words to students by using pantomime or pictures is considered as 'intersemiotic' translation.

In spite of the theoretical discussions and justifications for the use of translation in language classes, and the call for revival or reassessment of its role in language teaching from both the Language Teaching scholars (such as Cook, 2010), and Translation Studies scholars (such as Pym, 2016), one can see the paucity of empirical studies examining the positive or negative effects of the use of translation on students' learning. Therefore, this study was set up to examine the potential facilitative or debilitating influence that the use of L1 can have on EFL students' vocabulary learning.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

The use of Translation in Language Teaching (TILT) has had many ups and down during the history of language teaching. Generally, the use of TILT was very popular during the GTM era, and then it was totally rejected by the advent of "reform movement" and "Direct Method" (Cook, 2010). However, some researchers referred to the positive effects of "judicious" use of TILT (Cook, 2010). Following the calls for the reassessment of the role L1 in language teaching, some experimental studies have been conducted to examine the effectiveness of using students' mother language in EFL classrooms.

For example, Miles (2004) examined the effect of using L1 in English language classrooms at Birmingham University. The participants of this study spoke Japanese as their first language and they were 18 to 19 years old. The results of this study indicated that the use of L1 does not hinder language learning but actually improves it. The use of L1 improved learners' speaking skill significantly. Also the findings showed that the learners outperformed in the exercises that they were permitted to use L1.

In another study, Arenas-Iglesias (2016) asked students' opinion about the use of mother tongue in language teaching. The participants of this study were thirty-eight learners; and their first language was Spanish. Two teachers also participated in this study, a Spanish native speaker and an English Native speaker who knew Spanish. It was concluded that the use of L1 was highly preferred by both teachers and learners under certain circumstances. It was also concluded that L1 did not hinder learning progress, but using only English language gave the students a negative feeling.

Similarly, Pablo, Lengeling, Zenil, Crawford, and Goodwin (2011) conducted a qualitative study to investigate the perceptions on the use of L1 in foreign language teaching contexts from the perspective of English and French teachers and students in a Mexican institute, through the use of questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The findings indicated that the majority of the teachers and students mentioned that the role of L1 is positive in language teaching. However, a small number of the students did not like the use of L1 and preferred to only use the target language. Likewise, Littlewood and Yu (2011) rejected the view that L1 should be prohibited and should only be used in language classrooms as a last resort. They believe that teachers should strike a balance between the use of L1 and target language.

Additionally, Titford (1983) suggested two proper methods for teaching English to advanced English learners, namely 'spoof translation' and 'back translation'. Titford believed that translation can be used as a problem solving practice and students can also compare the context of target language with their mother tongue. As a result, students can have proper communication in that specific language. Moreover, Edge (1986) believed that there is a relationship between teaching foreign languages and translation, and claimed that "There is no obvious reason why an ability to translate should not be seen as a type of communicative competence" (p. 121).

According to Heltai (1989), if translation is used correctly, it can increase the motivation of advanced learners and help them scrutinize the differences between the two languages. The author also pointed out that the advanced students are expected to translate some kinds of texts outside of the classroom environment. Thus it is better to use translation techniques and exercises in the class. In addition, Atkinson (1987) mentioned several advantages of using mother tongue and translation in the classrooms such as creating learning tools and strategies for the students, giving the students an opportunity to communicate easily in the class, and using the least time to have the most efficient teaching.

Furthermore, Bawcom (2002) conducted a study about the use of mother tongue in the class. It showed that participants used mother tongue for several reasons such as 1) affective factors (36%) like security, social interaction, and sense of identity; 2) conducting and completing learning strategies (41%) such as checking for both comprehension and homework; 3) and translating instructions and also sets of vocabulary (18%); however, 5% of participants used their mother tongue and translation without any obvious reason.

Additionally, Vaezi and Mirzaei (2007) examined the impact of translation as a teaching strategy to improve linguistic accuracy of EFL learners. The participants of this study consisted of seventy two pre-intermediate students. The authors

administrated pre-test and post-test. The purpose of the pre-test was to identify those participants who did not have any information about passive voice, indirect reported speech, conditional type two, and wish + simple past. Based on the obtained scores from the pre-test, the participants were divided into two groups (i.e. experimental and control). In the experimental group, translation was used for newly learned structures. Conversely, in the control group, grammar activities were given to students, without using any translation. Finally, a post-test was given to the participants. It was concluded that the experimental group had a better performance compared with that of the control one.

In another study, Cianflone (2009) interviewed the teachers and students of the University of Messina in Italy. He found that students and teachers are keen to use L1 to explain grammar, vocabulary, and complex concepts. He also added that using translation can save time and boost students' motivation in language classes in the university contexts.

Furthermore, Lee (2013) discussed about the impact of using translation on reading comprehension of EFL students. Thus, 35 undergraduate students of Chinese-English classes were chosen; and then they were divided into English major group and non-English major one. After that, a text about love relationship among adults was given to the students and they were asked to translate two paragraphs of this text and answer five multiple choice questions, three of which were related to the translated part. After analyzing their answers, the results showed that translation helped students' reading comprehension.

In another study, Spahiu (2013) prepared a questionnaire to know the ESL students' and teachers' attitudes and opinions about using L1 during the teaching and learning processes. He wanted to see when it is appropriate to use native language in classrooms and how to use it to promote language learning. Assessing their views, he concluded that the participants considered using native language in the classroom as essential and acceptable. In addition, he believed that there was no scientific reason for excluding mother tongue in language classrooms.

Besides, Fernandez-Guerra (2014) was another researcher who attempted to show the effect of using translation on language learning. The participants of this study were 93 first year students of Computer Science and 62 second year English Language students. The students' attitudes and opinions about translation tasks and also the effect of these tasks on language learning were being asked. Findings indicated that they had positive attitudes about using translation because they thought it can result in increasing their motivation, improving their comprehension, making them reflect on their thoughts faster and easier, and helping them to acquire linguistic and cultural issues.

Moreover, Hassanabadi and Heidari (2014) tried to find if using intersemiotic translation tools like multimedia ones have any positive effects on vocabulary learning. To show this, they chose two elementary groups of students. One group watched a cartoon with subtitles and the other one watched the same cartoon without subtitles. By analyzing the performance of each group they found out that the subtitling group showed a better performance.

On the other hand, Gorusch (1998) explored a form of Grammar-Translation in the Japanese education system, i.e. 'yakudoku', and the problems it created. The result indicated that the students had a heavy reliance on translation, and "focused the bulk of their attention on the Japanese translations of the English text, rather than the English text itself" (p. 6). Hence, she believed that translation hindered the process of learning and made the students focus more on L1 rather than the target language. Similarly, Wharton (2007) examined whether using translation was appropriate for all kinds of learners. The researcher claimed that since learners had limited opportunities to use English outside of the classroom environment, in English language classes the use of English language should be overemphasized. Similarly, in another study, Harbord (1992) claimed that translation should be avoided in language classrooms. He believes that students cannot have a perfect insight into the lexis which are in isolation from any real context.

However, despite these researches, experimental studies investigating the effect of using EFL students' L1 on their vocabulary learning are lacking. Therefore, the present study aims to examine the impact of using translation/L1 on EFL students' vocabulary learning.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Participants**

The participants of this study included seventy-two EFL learners taking English classes in a foreign language institute in Birjand City, Iran. Based on their language proficiency level, thirty learners (fifteen girls, fifteen boys) were classified as 'beginner'. Their age-range was from 8 to 10. Twenty two learners (eleven girls, eleven boys) were categorized as 'elementary'. Their age ranged from 11 to 13. And twenty learners (ten girls, ten boys) were classified as 'pre-intermediate'. Their age range was from 12 to 15. Each level was randomly divided into two equal classes, namely, control and experimental.

### **Procedure**

As stated earlier, the purpose of this study was to examine the effect of using translation on EFL students' vocabulary learning. Participants were divided into three proficiency levels and six classes (two classes for each level, namely experimental and control groups). In the experimental group, after teaching the new words through images and pictures or body language, students' L1 was used to tell the students the Persian equivalence(s) of the words, while in the control group, the Persian meaning was not told to the students and only the target language and visuals were used for teaching the new words. The classes were held for 20 sessions, each one lasted for 1.5 hour. The classes were held two days per week.

The materials taught in this study were vocabularies adopted from students' course books. After 20 sessions of instruction (each one lasted for one hour and a half) at the end of the term, a post-test was taken from the participants. Then, the students'

performance in the control and experimental groups was compared using independent sample T-test to examine the effect of using L1 in teaching vocabulary to the learners.

## RESULTS

Table 1 shows the students' performance in the control and experimental groups across three proficiency levels. As indicated in the Table, the mean scores of the experimental groups were 29, 34, and 34 for Beginner, Elementary, and Pre-intermediate students which are higher than the scores of their counterparts in the control groups which were 26, 32, and 29 for Beginner, Elementary, and Intermediate students respectively. This means that the students in the experimental groups outperformed the students in the control ones.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of all students' performance in the posttest

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Sum	Mean
Beginner Experimental	15	22.00	36.50	439.50	29.3000
Beginner Control	15	18.00	34.00	401.00	26.7333
Elementary Experimental	11	20.00	40.00	379.50	34.5000
Elementary Control	11	25.50	39.50	360.00	32.7273
Pre-intermediate Experimental	10	28.50	38.50	343.00	34.3000
Pre-intermediate Control	10	20.50	36.00	294.50	29.4500

Apart from the descriptive statistics, inferential statistics was also run to compare the mean scores of the students in the experimental and control groups for each proficiency level. The first Independent Sample T-test was used to examine if there is any significant difference between the Beginner level students' performance in the experimental and control groups in the post-test. As indicated in Table 2, there is a significant difference between the two groups (Sig. <.05), and the experimental group outperformed the control group.

Table 2: T-test between Beginner students' performance in the Experimental and Control groups

	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Experimental Group	24.316	14	.000	29.30000	26.7156	31.8844
Control Group	24.192	14	.000	26.73333	24.3633	29.1034

Another T-test was administered to examine if there is any significant difference between the Elementary level students' performance in the experimental and control groups in the post-test. As indicated in Table 3, the experimental group outperformed the control one (Sig.<.05).

*Table 3: T-test between elementary students' performance in the Experimental and Control groups*

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Experimental Group	17.289	10	.000	34.50000	30.0539	38.9461
Control Group	23.345	10	.000	32.72727	29.6037	35.8509

The results of the third T-test also indicated a significant difference between the Experimental and Control groups (Sig. <.05). The experimental group outperformed the control one in the posttest as indicated in Table 4.

*Table 4: T-test between pre-intermediate students' performance in the Experimental and Control groups*

	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Experimental Group	27.690	9	.000	34.30000	31.4978	37.1022
Control Group	17.172	9	.000	29.45000	25.5703	33.3297

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of using translation (L1) in teaching vocabulary to EFL students. The findings indicated that the experimental group in which L1 was used for teaching vocabulary outperformed the control group in which just the target language was used in all three proficiency levels.

The findings of this study are in line with the results of some other studies conducted before all showing the positive influence of using translation in teaching foreign languages (Atkinson, 1987; Edge, 1986; Hekmati, Ghahremani Ghajar & Navidinia, 2018; Lee, 2013; Navidinia & Toushe, 2017; Titford, 1983). The findings also supported the theoretical discussions about the beneficial effect of 'judicious' use of translation in language teaching made by some scholars (Cook, 2001; Cook, 2007; Cook, 2010; Malmkjær, 2004; Pym, 2016; Pym, Malmkjær & Gutiérrez, 2013).

One reason that can explain the findings of this study is the participants' language proficiency. They were beginner, elementary, and pre-intermediate and had low level of language proficiency. It is believed by some scholars (such as Groot & Van Hall, 2005) that during the beginning stages of foreign/second language learning, the new language is learned through the lexicon of the learners' native language, and gradually the learners develop a new lexicon for the second/foreign language that they can have direct access to. As Groot and Van Hall (2005) put it, the retrieval of foreign language words is believed to begin "with the activation of the meaning representation of its translation in L1 and then to "pass through" the L1 form representation before the FL form is retrieved and produced" (p. 20). However, gradually, as the language proficiency of the learners develops "the FL word form starts to become functionally detached from the corresponding L1 word representation and to access meaning as directly as the corresponding L1 word does" (Groot & Van Hall, 2005, p. 20). Therefore, the learners in this study learned the new words more efficiently when they knew their exact meaning in their native language.

It has also been shown that the use of students' L1 can lower the level of learners' stress and anxiety (Cianflone, 2009; Fernandez-Guerra, 2014; Spahiu, 2013) that can positively influence students' learning. Being stressed is one of the reasons that can negatively influence students' learning and performance (Azizifar, Faryadian, & Gowhary, 2014; Harwood, 2010), specially for those learners having less tolerance of ambiguity who prefer to know the exact meaning of the words in their native language.

Furthermore, according to Cook (2005) translation also boost learners' focus on form. When students can focus more on the input, they can learn it more efficiently and retain it for a longer time in their memory. According to Zhang (2012), many researchers in the field of cognitive psychology believe that language learning is similar to other types of learning, and noticing and focus on form can be a "medium between input and memory system" (p. 580).

It has also been argued by some scholars such as Cook (2010) that the financial and political and not the pedagogic and educational factors have been behind the promotion of 'monolingual' approach to EFL education. Therefore, apart from the educational benefits of using translation in language teaching, it can have 'social' and 'humanistic' advantages too as it can give more voice to the students' values and preferences (Cook, 2010).

Based on the findings of this study, and the previous studies indicating a positive influence of using L1 in foreign language classes, it seems it is the time that the 'English only' slogan is questioned in many ELT contexts. More EFL teachers should be encouraged to 'judiciously' use students' mother tongue while teaching the foreign language. Furthermore, materials designers should take into account students' mother tongue and culture while designing teaching materials.

The present study tried to shed some light on the influence of using translation in teaching vocabulary to EFL students. Considering the importance of this issue and the paucity of empirical studies in this regard, it is hoped that other researchers continue this line of research in order to explore the potential effects of using translation in teaching vocabulary and other language skills and components.



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