

TRANSLATION AS A LEARNING TOOL IN ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES

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Introduction

The state-of-the-art teaching of languages is based on the communicative method which emphasizes teaching English through English (Willis 1981). However, the idea of abandoning the native tongue is too stressful to many learners, who need a sense of security in the experience of learning a foreign language.

In the past, the prevalence of grammar-translation method led to an extraordinary phenomenon: students were unable to speak fluently after having studied the language for a long time. For this reason, translation has been defined as “uncommunicative, boring, pointless, difficult, and irrelevant” (Duff, 1994).

Recently there has been a revival of interest to translation due to the shift of its emphasis – to using a mother tongue as a resource for the promotion of language learning. Translation method develops three qualities essential to any language learning: accuracy, clarity, and flexibility (Duff 1994). Therefore, translation can serve as a tool for improving language skills.

Goals of research

The goals of the paper are, firstly, to examine students’ perceptions of mother tongue application and mental translation in learning English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and secondly, to describe the activities which raise learners’ awareness of language use. Comparison between the L1 and L2 through translation can help learners to activate language usage and serve as a tool to polish up learners’ English.

Methods of research

Research methods employ the data of the survey of students' perceptions of the amount of mother tongue they need in acquisition of professional language at tertiary level and mental translation in various class activities.

Background information: translation and use of mother tongue in English language teaching

It is necessary to discriminate between the teaching of translation as a vocational skill and the use of translation in the teaching situation as an aid to language learning. The need for some translation in language learning is usually supported by non-native teachers. Native teachers of English argue that foreign language learning needs as much exposure to L2 as possible during the precious classroom time, and any usage of L1 or translation is a waste of time.

In the past, most methods in L2 language pedagogy dictated that L1 should be prohibited in the classroom. Communicative approaches to language learning in the 1970s and 1980s considered the use of L1 as undesirable. However, recently the attitude to mother tongue and translation in language classes has undergone a positive change.

Translation is sometimes referred to as the fifth language skill alongside with the other four basic skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing): "Translation holds a special importance at an intermediate and advanced level: in the advanced or final stage of language teaching, translation from L1 to L2 and L2 to L1 is recognized as the fifth skill and the most important social skill since it promotes communication and understanding between strangers" (Ross 2000).

No matter how good the students are at comprehending authentic reading or listening materials, the majority keeps mentally translating from L2 into L1 and vice versa. This fact makes teachers of foreign languages aware of the importance of translation in language classrooms.

Why do students use their mother tongue in class? According to J. Harmer (2001), a principal cause of this L1 use is provoked by the activity, i.e. if students are linguistically incapable of activating vocabulary for a chosen task. Another reason is that translation is a natural thing to do in learning a language, and code-switching between L1 and L2 is regarded as naturally developmental. The amount of L1 use by particular students may well have to do with differing learner styles and abilities. "No one is in any doubt that students will use their L1 in class, whatever teachers say or do" (Harmer 2001).

Evidence from research into the crucial issue of the L1 use in classrooms around the world is analyzed by G. Mattioli (2004). For instance, L1 use in the Chinese classrooms offers evidence that L1 is a valuable tool for socio-cognitive processes in language learning. Another reason for L1 use in the classroom relates to the fostering of a positive affective environment. C. W. Schweers (1999) encourages teachers to insert the native language into lessons to influence the classroom dynamic, provide a sense of security and validate the learners' experiences.

The real usefulness of translation in English classes lies in exploiting it in order to compare grammar, vocabulary, word order and other language points in English and the student's mother tongue. According to N. J. Ross (2000), if students are aware of the differences, language interference (transfer) and intervention from their own language are likely to be reduced.

Numerous studies indicated that both negative and positive transfer between L1 and L2 was important for development of the interlanguage, the complex system of the learners' L2. Many teachers recognize that L1 in the classroom is a positive representation of interlanguage. The data on interlanguage and language transfer show that it is highly probable that L2 learners will always think most often in their L1, even at the advanced level (Mahmoud, 2006). Moreover, translation in L2 classroom offers a way to highlight similarities and differences between L1 and L2 forms. The translation is useful for L2 acquisition because, firstly, it uses authentic materials, secondly, it is interactive, thirdly, it is learner-centered, and finally it promotes learner autonomy (Mahmoud 2006).

Regarding the use of L1 in the L2 classroom, it is important to find out how students themselves feel about it. C. Schweers (1999) conducted a research into this issue and found out that a high percentage (88.7%) of the student participants felt that mother tongue should be used in their English classes. Moreover, if learners of a second language are encouraged to ignore their native language, they might well feel their identity threatened. One of the authors (Janulevičienė and Kavaliauskienė 2000, 2004) participated in a research into the use of mother tongue and translation in ESP classes. Our data were close to those reported by C. Schweers. As many as 86% out of 110 respondents felt that the native language should be used in the classroom, particularly for explaining difficult concepts (90%), introducing new material (57%), defining new vocabulary (74%), explaining the link between English and Lithuanian (55%). It is noteworthy that in teaching / learning ESP it had been a long-felt dissatisfaction, mainly on the students' part, about the exclusion or minimal use of translation in mastering complex issues. Learners constantly wished to check the exact meanings of the professional terms in their native language by consulting bilingual dictionaries or asking for teacher's explanations.

Native language use in the classroom can cause students to think that words and structures in English have an L1 correspondence, which may not exist. Therefore, raising students' consciousness of the non-parallel nature of language allows learners to think comparatively (Atkinson 1993). The important question is how to reach a balance of L1 in the learning process. It is suggested that four factors should be considered, namely, the students' previous experience, the students' level, the stage of the course, and the stage of the individual lesson (Atkinson 1993).

The recently published blog on the plenary session at the IATEFL Conference in Aberdeen, 18–20 April, 2007, refers to the ideas of a well known linguist Guy Cook, who was a speaker there (online): „The most important statement was the fact that EFL and ESL teachers tend to take a monolingual approach thus neglecting the importance of translation in the process of teaching English. The EFL/ESL classroom cannot follow the motto “One nation, one people, one language”, a somewhat overrated statement since it implies that a classroom is a state. Quite contrary to that, L1, i.e. the mother tongue of the students, should by all means be acknowledged. The importance is highlighted even more by the fact that the students' culture is part of their language and by neglecting their language the teacher, in a monolingual classroom, neglects their culture, which leads to the danger of neglecting their identity as well. What is more, there is no valid database that could confirm the standpoint that the monolingual approach in teaching is the best one. The disregard of the students' mother tongue can in fact de-motivate the students and be counterproductive. Therefore, there is neither a scientific nor a pedagogic reason to exclude L1

from the teaching process. There are probably more reasons, utilitarian and political, to make the use of L1 quite valuable in the process of teaching English. The former reason implies that the students would be motivated to think more about appropriate equivalents in their own languages and the latter one, of course, emphasizes the importance of cultural diversities and tolerance among nations". Taking into account what has been written above, it is essential to bring research into the use of mother tongue and utility of translation up-to-date.

Recent results of teachers' voting on the use of mother tongue in the English classroom reveal the following (http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/talk/vote/vote15_mother_tongue.shtml): 21% of respondents use only English, 58% sometimes use mother tongue, 8% – frequently, 7% – most of the time, 6% – about half the time. There were 641 respondents in this research.

There is an opinion that "rigidly eliminating or limiting the native language does not appear to guarantee better acquisition, nor does it foster the humanistic approach that recognizes learners' identities (Mattioli 2004). Translation as a teaching tool needs to take into account a number of different aspects, such as grammar, syntax, collocation and connotation. Uncritical use of translation may give learners insufficient, confusing, or even inaccurate information about target language.

This research aims, first, at rating contemporary students' perceptions of mental translation they employ in learning, and, second, at sharing the experiences of using translation in class activities. The implications of the usage of mother tongue in learning ESP are described.

Respondents and methods

Respondents in this research were students specializing in Social Sciences at Mykolas Romeris University and studying English for Specific Purposes. There were 45 participants aged 18 to 22 in this project. They were predominantly females at the pre-intermediate and intermediate levels. The amount of time spent in L2 environment was 4 hours per week for 2 semesters, which amounts to about 130 hours of English instruction. In this study we administered a brief survey designed in accordance with the accepted standards to surveys in Social Sciences (Dornyei, 2003). All the statements were rated on the Likert scale of five possible answers: 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 – not sure, 4 – agree, 5 – strongly agree. The obtained data were statistically processed and interpreted.

Data on learners' perceptions of mother tongue use

The data were obtained for five groups of students of three specializations: psychology, social work, and social work at penitentiary institutions. The students were asked to rate 7 statements on the five-point Likert scale. The statements are reproduced below.

- 1) *In English classes, I occasionally prefer to use my mother tongue. 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 – not sure, 4 – agree, 5 – strongly agree.*
- 2) *In writing activities, I often mentally translate ideas from my mother tongue into English. 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 – not sure, 4 – agree, 5 – strongly agree.*
- 3) *While reading ESP texts I use a bilingual dictionary to translate unknown words. 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 – not sure, 4 – agree, 5 – strongly agree.*

- 4) *In ESP vocabulary tests, it is easier for me to translate terms from English than into English. 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 – not sure, 4 – agree, 5 – strongly agree.*
- 5) *In listening activities, I mentally translate what I hear. 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 – not sure, 4 – agree, 5 – strongly agree.*
- 6) *Making presentations or giving individual talks, I prefer to look at my notes – I worry about my English. 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 – not sure, 4 – agree, 5 – strongly agree.*
- 7) *In impromptu speaking, I find it hard to recall the ESP terms. 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 – not sure, 4 – agree, 5 –strongly agree.*

The survey results are summarized in Table 1. Numbers 1 to 7 in Table 1 match the above statements.

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations and Two-Tailed Significance Levels computed for each statement and different groups. The number of respondents: Penitentiary (PN) specialization– 8 students, Psychology (PS) specialization– 20 students, Social Work (SW) specialization – 17 students.

	Means			Standard Deviations			Two-tailed significance levels (p)		
	PN	PS	SW	PN	PS	SW	PN vs PS	PN vs SW	PS vs SW
1	4.25	3.65	4.31	0.66	0.96	0.57	0.070	0.819	0.014
2	3.50	3.20	4.13	0.87	0.93	0.97	0.424	0.118	0.006
3	4.13	4.00	4.06	0.60	0.71	0.94	0.640	0.842	0.822
4	4.00	4.45	4.50	0.71	0.74	0.97	0.145	0.158	0.864
5	4.00	2.60	3.19	0.87	1.11	1.08	0.001	0.054	0.112
6	3.38	3.40	3.69	0.86	0.86	0.89	0.945	0.409	0.327
7	3.38	2.60	3.50	1.22	1.11	1.14	0.130	0.809	0.021

High values of the Means (above 4) point to a strong or simple agreement with the statement. The Mean values around 3 testify learners' doubts, while values below 3 show disagreement with the statement. Therefore, students, who study penitentiary (first column) and social work (third column), are more likely to use their mother tongue than students of psychology (second column of Table1).

The data show that all the students are quite positive about the use of mother tongue in English classes, but the amount of it depends on learners' proficiency in English. The less proficient learners of PN specialization require more reference to mother tongue – the Mean values of this group to the statements 1, 3, and 5 are higher. Similarly, the students of SW specialization rated more positively the statements 1, 2, 4, 5, than the students of PS specialization, who are the most proficient out of three specializations. The students of PS specialization generally prefer less code switching in the same linguistic situation – statements 1, 3, 5, and 7. Moreover, in certain cases the PS students are more negative to the use of mother tongue, e.g. the Mean values to the statements 2, 5, and 6 are between 2 and 3.

This trend is quite obvious in Chart 1, where the data show the percentage of positive responses to each statement. The columns are arranged in groups of three: the 1st represents the positive responses of the PS students, while the 2nd – of the PN students, and the 3rd – of the SW students. It

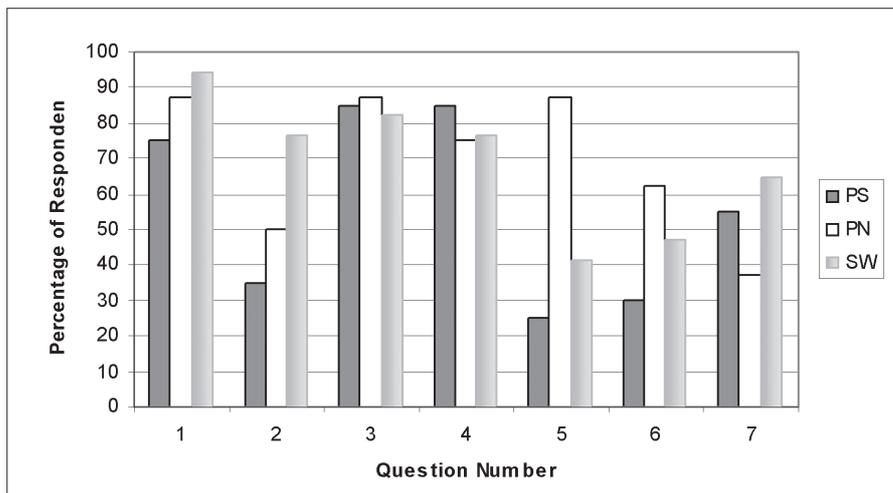


Chart 1. Percentage of learners of each specialization who responded positively to statements 1 to 7.

demonstrates that responses to the 1st and 2nd statements are spread out from the lowest for the PS students to the highest for the SW students. The evaluations of the 3rd and 4th statements are almost leveled off. The most significant difference is observed in the evaluation of the 5th statement – the lowest by the PS students and the highest by the PN students, while the responses to the 6th and 7th statements do not differ significantly. Thus, the results demonstrate the importance of mother tongue in learning ESP. Two main differences in students’ attitudes are 1) the amount of mother tongue that the learners of different specialization need, and 2) the different situations for the use of mother tongue.

In social sciences, experimental data are analyzed using inferential statistics. Statistical computations allow drawing conclusions about the significance of research questions. Here it has been important to assess whether the difference between the Means and Standard Deviations for various statements between the groups is significant or not. Statistical significance is the probability that a particular statistical result occurred by chance. The findings were processed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. The computed ratios p allow to compare how significant are the differences in the Means. The ratios are labeled PN versus PS, PN versus SW, and PS versus SW and are shown in Table 1 (columns 7, 8, and 9). It can be seen that p values are different for various statements, and there is a great scattering of p values. The interpretation of p values is as follows: very small p values indicate that there is significant difference between the responses. However if the p values are close to 1, it means that the differences between the responses are very few. These results allow drawing a conclusion that, in spite of the small sample of respondents, the data are statistically significant and can be applied beyond the studied sample.

Translation activities in ESP teaching and learning

It is now generally accepted that language transfer, or cross-linguistic influence, does occur, but is a far more complex phenomenon than hitherto believed (Benson, 2002). It can be positive and facilitative, when there are no significant differences between two languages, or negative, when there are significant differences. Transfer may occur at all levels: phonology, syntax, lexis, and pragmatics. Raising learners' consciousness can be valuable: teachers can explicitly point out differences between L1 and L2. For this purpose translation may be useful, because it can be interactive, learner-centered, it promotes learners' autonomy, and uses authentic materials (Mahmoud 2006).

With the ESP learners, we have used a number of activities that are beneficial for their linguistic development. Post-reading activities give students the opportunity to review, summarize, and react to a reading material through discussions in small or large groups. After having read a professional passage as a homework assignment, students were encouraged to generate various comprehension exercises, such as multiple choice questions, true or false statements, general questions on the contents of a professional text. Students' generated exercises were scrutinized in pairs or small groups. The activity of writing different types of summaries, e.g. restatement, descriptive summary or opinion essays, has proved being very useful. It allowed teachers to pin-point errors stemming from the mother tongue, although checking written work increased teacher's load significantly. The most beneficial activity has been back-translation class activity. Selected texts for re-translation should not be too long, or too linguistically complex, or too distant from the students' ESP knowledge. Students in pairs translated different short professional passages from L2 into L1. Then pairs exchanged their translations and translated the passages back into L2. Finally translations L2 → L1 → L2 were examined and compared with the original texts. The ultimate analysis allowed raising learners' awareness of vocabulary, grammar, style, and language transfer.

Conclusions

First, all the learners customarily rely on their mother tongue in learning ESP. Second, the amount of the native language that the students need depends on their proficiency and linguistic situations. Third, the statistical processing of the research findings showed that qualitative factors, i.e. student needs level for referring to L1 in the English classroom may be measured very accurately and significant data can be obtained even if the number of respondents is relatively small. Finally, the autonomously generated translation activities help raise learners' awareness of language transfer and may facilitate linguistic development.

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**VERTIMAS KAIP METODAS MOKANTIS
ANGLŲ KALBOS SPECIALIESIEMS TIKSLAMS**

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S a n t r a u k a

Susidomėjimą vertimu kaip metodu anglų kalbos mokyme ir mokymesi specialiesiems tikslams (ESP) skatina jo privalumai – aiškumas bei tikslumas. Šiame straipsnyje analizuojami studentų vertinimai, kokias užduotis atliekant jiems prisireikia gimtosios kalbos anglų kalbos užsiėmimuose. Tyrimas rodo, kad visiems besimokantiems gimtoji kalba (L1) yra paranki, tačiau tai, kiek ja remiamasi, priklauso nuo antrosios kalbos (L2) žinių. Gautų duomenų analizė atskleidžia, jog tariamai subjektyvus studentų gimtosios kalbos poreikis užsienio kalbos mokymesi yra pastovus kokybinis ir vertybinis faktorius ir gali būti tiksliai matuojamas Socialinių mokslų statistinio paketo (SPSS) pagalba.

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