

BENEFITS AND DRAWBACKS OF USING TRANSLATION IN ESP CLASSES

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Lect PhD MIRELA COSTELEANU

**The National University of Science and Technology Politehnica Bucharest,
Pitești University Centre**

Abstract: *In the past, translation was widely seen as a counterproductive method of teaching and learning in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes. Many theorists and researchers advocated for minimizing the use of translation on the grounds that it was believed to interfere with the development of direct thinking in the target language. Methods such as the Direct Method and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) were aimed at replicating the natural language acquisition process. Translation was commonly perceived as a crutch that encouraged learners to overrely on their first language, hindering them from developing the ability to communicate freely and naturally in the target language, an ability which is highly valued in everyday situations as well as in the workplace. Over the last few decades, the role of translation in EFL and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classes has been reevaluated. Once viewed as a barrier to language acquisition, translation is now increasingly recognized as a valuable resource as long as it is used moderately and strategically. Research and classroom experience show that the judicious use of translation can support vocabulary retention, helping teachers clarify difficult grammar issues and reduce learners' anxiety, especially at lower proficiency levels. Modern language teaching recommends balancing translation with communicative activities that promote immersion and authentic language use.*

Keywords: *translation; advantages; disadvantages; strategic; terminology*

1. Introduction

The use of translation in EFL and ESP classes is a controversial and widely debated issue in language teaching. The debate stems from opposing theoretical approaches to language teaching, especially between monolingual, communicative approaches, which lay stress on immersion and interaction in the target language and bilingual or contrastive approaches, which acknowledge the strategic role played by the learner's first language in the learning process of a foreign language.

2. Literature review

In the past, translation as a teaching method fell into disgrace largely because of its strong association with the Grammar-Translation Method, a traditional approach that laid emphasis on memorization of grammar rules and direct translation of texts. This method was criticized for being overly focused on written language, lacking communicative relevance, and failing to improve learners' speaking and listening skills.

Unlike the Grammar Translation Method, the Communicative Approach reduced and even banned the use of translation as a central teaching technique in favour of the immersive, interactive use of the target language. As communicative approaches gained a lot of popularity in the latter half of the 20th century, translation was eliminated from foreign language classes along with other aspects of the Grammar Translation Method, such as reduced interaction and the tendency to prioritize accuracy over fluency. Consequently, translation was viewed not as a legitimate pedagogical tool, but as a remnant of outdated teaching practices.

Richards describes the shift from the Grammar Translation Method to the Communicative Approach as a movement away from “grammatical competence [...] to the knowledge and skills needed to use grammar and other aspects of language appropriately for different communicative purposes”¹. Proponents of the Communicative Approach of language teaching strongly believe that the use of the mother tongue is counterproductive in the process of acquiring a new language, which is why the use of translation in the classroom could do more damage than good, hindering learners from becoming spontaneous communicators in the target language². The use of L1 and translation should be abandoned entirely since the primary goal of language instruction is to enable learners to communicate effectively and meaningfully in real-life situations. Modern theorists and researchers criticize translation for promoting passive learning, lacking interaction, not encouraging creativity and spontaneity as well as for being teacher-centred rather than student-centred³. Translation is also described as counterproductive, frustrating, demotivating and generally not suited for the average learner⁴ (Carreres, 2006).

However, over the last few decades, researchers have reevaluated the use of translation in EFL classes, highlighting the fact that both L1 and translation have often been used by teachers along the years although few of them are willing to admit it. EFL teachers still rely on translation to some extent, using it as a scaffolding tool. In spite of the criticism the Translation Method was faced with due to its limitations in encouraging natural language use, it continues to play an important role in language teaching, especially in situations where linguistic accuracy is of paramount importance. It is seen as a good pedagogical tool which should be explored and used strategically in EFL classes⁵ (Harmer, 2001). Many contemporary theorists and researchers have analysed the role of translation in

¹ Richards, Jack, *Communicative language teaching today*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 9.

² Carreres, Ángeles, *Strange Bedfellows: Translation and Language Teaching. The Teaching of Translation into L2 in Modern Languages Degrees: Uses and Limitations*, 2006, <http://www.cttic.org/ACTI/2006/papers/Carreres.pdf>.

³ Sapargul, Destan, Sartor, Valerie, *The Trans-Cultural Comparative Literature Method: Using Grammar Translation Techniques Effectively*, 2010, p. 27.

⁴ Carreres, Ángeles, *Strange Bedfellows: Translation and Language Teaching. The Teaching of Translation into L2 in Modern Languages Degrees: Uses and Limitations*, 2006, <http://www.cttic.org/ACTI/2006/papers/Carreres.pdf>.

⁵ Harmer, Jeremy, *The Practice of English Language Teaching*, London, Longman, 2001.

language teaching and learning, emphasizing its benefits for learners, particularly when used strategically: Schweers (1999), Cook (2001), Carreres (2006), Liao (2006), Dagiliene (2012) and Mollalei et al (2017). Their conclusion is that translation as a teaching method should be integrated into EFL classes for various reasons. First of all, students, especially at elementary levels, translate mentally⁶. The use of L1 is a natural process. As Jeremy Harmer points out, “when we learn a foreign language, we use translation almost without thinking about it, particularly at elementary and intermediate levels”⁷. The complete elimination of translation from EFL classes “does not necessarily lead to student progress”⁸.

Contrary to the general belief, translation as a teaching method is communicative. As Ana B. Fernández-Guerra suggests, “as a communicative act, translation in language teaching can expose EFL students to various text types, registers, styles, contexts, etc. that resemble the way languages are used in real-life for communicative purposes”⁹. Moreover, translation used as a teaching technique requires the use of authentic materials, being interactive, learner-centred, and promoting learner autonomy.

Translation can also play a strategic and highly effective role in ESP classes, where learners study English with a clear professional, academic or technical goal in mind. Incorporating translation methods in ESP classes can be a good choice on condition they are tailored to learners’ proficiency levels and their exact needs. Translation serves as a bridge between the native language and the target language and as a means to develop communicative competence and to address specific academic and professional language requirements. Translation-based activities consolidate reading, writing, speaking and listening skills, developing analytical skills and improving communicative competence.

3. Advantages of using translation in ESP classes

ESP courses are usually short-term and goal-driven, which makes translation an efficient tool in helping learners bridge gaps without having to make great efforts to understand lengthy explanations. Mechanical engineering students, for instance, may prefer the direct translation of such a phrase as *yield point* to a lengthy explanation (*punctul de rupere* versus *the material property defined as the stress at which a material begins to deform plastically*). The clearer the meaning of the technical terms students encounter, the easier it will be for them to memorize them and to learn how to use them later in new contexts.

Translation saves time both for teachers and for learners. It is well known that ESP teachers are language experts, not subject-matter specialists, which is why

⁶ Duff, Alan, *Translation: Resource books for teachers*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994.

⁷ Harmer, Jeremy, *The Practice of English Language Teaching*, London, Longman, 2001, p. 131.

⁸ Mattioli, G., *On Native Language Intrusions and Making Do With Words: Linguistically Homogenous Classrooms and Native Language Use*, 2000, p. 25.

⁹ Fernández-Guerra, Ana B., *The Usefulness of Translation in Foreign Language Learning: Students’ Attitudes*, 2014, p. 155.

they have limited subject knowledge. When dealing with complex mechanical engineering concepts, ESP teachers themselves find it challenging to understand them fully and unequivocally. Explaining the difference between two complex mechanical processes requires in-depth technical knowledge, which most ESP teachers lack. Translation helps learners grasp meaning quickly. Beginners prefer translation to other teaching methods because their limited vocabulary does not allow them to understand whole explanations in English. When they are given equivalents in their native language, they can connect new terms to prior knowledge more easily and more effectively.

Translation leaves no room for interpretation. In the field of engineering, clarity, accuracy and precision in communication are not optional - they are essential for safety and project success. Unclear communication may have serious consequences, ranging from inefficiencies in the workplace to catastrophic failures. Misinterpretation of instructions and safety procedures may result in accidents, equipment failures and even loss of life.

Translation enhances comprehension and confidence. The strategic use of translation can help learners feel more secure in their understanding of technical materials. As long as they fully understand the meaning of the technical terms, they are able to grasp the main idea of a specialized text and thus be in control of their learning process. Not knowing the correct translation of the specialized terms makes them feel less confident and less willing to participate in classroom activities.

Translation helps engineering students memorize technical terms more easily. Instead of struggling to understand a complex definition in English, students can quickly grasp the meaning of the word by linking it to its Romanian equivalent, which they are usually familiar with.

4. Disadvantages of using translation in ESP classes

The first big disadvantage of using translation in ESP classes is students' over-reliance on their L1. Excessive reliance on Romanian can hinder the natural acquisition of English. Fluency acquisition is slowed down. Students have difficulty in developing their critical thinking, which makes it hard for them to process information directly in English. Instead of allowing and encouraging students to rely on their first language, ESP teachers should develop strategies to help students understand English directly.

Translation does not give students the opportunity to fully engage with English. Over-reliance on translation impedes communication and leads to errors due to language interference. Reduced exposure to English hinders the development of vocabulary and grammar as well as the improvement of pronunciation. When translating a technical text from English into Romanian, students usually focus on its comprehension rather than on internalizing the new words occurring in it.

Translation may lead to inaccuracies and misunderstandings. Some technical terms have different meanings in different fields of engineering. For

instance, the term *torque* refers to different concepts when used in the fields of mechanical engineering and electrical engineering (*a physical force causing rotation* versus *the rotational force generated by an electric motor*). The term *lead* refers to *the force applied to a machine or component* (mechanical engineering), to *the power consumed by a device or system* (electrical engineering) and to *the force exerted on a structure* (structural engineering). Some English technical terms do not have direct equivalents in Romanian. The English word *downforce*, for instance, is often explained as *forța aerodinamică de apăsare* since there is no exact Romanian equivalent for it. *Fatigue* is often translated as *oboseală a materialului*, but the English term is preferred by most engineers. *Superheat*, a word often used in Thermodynamics, has no direct equivalent in Romanian, being often translated as *supraîncălzire a vaporilor*. These variations in meaning show the importance of the context in engineering communication and the necessity to find the correct Romanian equivalent in order to avoid misunderstandings which might have serious consequences in the workplace, such as safety hazards and financial losses. Inaccurate translations of instruction manuals can result in incorrect assembly or operation of industrial equipment, which inevitably leads to accidents. A poor translation of project plans and technical reports can lead to delays in the production process. Engineering projects must comply with local regulations and standards. In case these regulations and standards are not met, companies risk being fined and their projects risk being shut down.

Students might have difficulty in expressing themselves freely in English if they are used to depending excessively on translation. When they rely too heavily on translation, they often fail to develop their ability to think directly in English. In real-time communication, they find it hard to be spontaneous and to avoid translating each and every word, a stressful process which makes them sound unnatural.

5. Factors that influence engineering students' preference for translation-based methods or for communicative approaches

Engineering students' preference for translation-based methods or for communicative approaches may vary depending on a number of factors such as their language proficiency, their learning style, their academic background and the course requirements.

Students who are proficient in English are less dependent on translation than their peers whose language level is lower. They find it easy to understand concepts no matter how complex they are, especially if they are already familiar with the technical topics being discussed in the specialized texts. They have enough linguistic competence to be able to think and communicate freely in the target language. They only need translation to clarify nuances and to contrast terminology in ESP. Less proficient students, on the other hand, lack the vocabulary, the grammar awareness and the fluency needed to function 100% in the target language. They see translation as a survival strategy that makes them feel

comfortable and confident about their ability to grasp the correct meaning of a difficult concept.

The need for translation is also closely connected with students' learning style. Visual learners may rely on translation to understand concepts more easily and more clearly than auditory learners who may prefer to hear explanations and to discuss concepts aloud.

Students' reliance on translation is also influenced by their prior exposure to engineering subjects. For students who have already studied fundamental subjects like physics and mechanics, the effort to understand technical concepts is less than it is in the case of those students who have had less exposure to them.

Students who are accustomed to hands-on, experiential learning methods - such as task-based learning, project work, or problem-solving activities - tend to rely less on translation when learning ESP. In contrast, those from traditional, lecture-based educational systems, where knowledge is often transmitted passively and memorization is highly valued, may be more inclined to depend on L1 translation as a learning crutch. Students who have studied humanities subjects - such as literature, history, or philosophy - often tend to engage in word-for-word or concept-for-concept translation when learning ESP whereas students who have previously studied the exact sciences - mathematics, physics - are more likely to approach language more analytically and functionally, and often rely less on translation as a learning tool.

Case Study

A questionnaire was administered to a group of Mechanical Engineering students to find out whether they prefer translation-based methods of teaching and learning to communicative methods that prioritize listening, speaking and interactive activities or whether they find the latter more effective than the former. The questionnaire was aimed at identifying students' main reasons for preferring translation to communicative activities or vice-versa. The students were also asked about their level of reliance on translation during classroom activities and while doing their homework at home. Another question referred to the way they think translation and communicative methods of teaching and learning benefit them or hinder them from improving their language level while studying in the classroom and outside the classroom.

The research participants were 50 Mechanical Engineering students. The study reveals that 21 students prefer translation-based methods to communicative methods. Their reasons for preferring the former to the latter are diverse. Thus, 9 students responded that precision and clarity are essential when dealing with technical terminology. According to 7 students, focusing on content helps more than concentrating on fluency. The other 5 students responded that they see translation as a faster way to grasp complex technical concepts than communicative methods that require more practice and exposure.

14 students responded that they prefer learning through communicative methods, seeing them as conducive to fluency acquisition. The remaining 15

students were in favour of a balanced approach between translation-based and communicative methods of teaching and learning. For them, technical accuracy and conversational fluency are equally important.

As to the level of reliance on translation, the 21 students who expressed their preference for translation-based methods showed high levels of dependence. 17 students admitted they use translation to understand specialized texts. The other 4 students rely permanently on translation both in the classroom and outside the classroom.

The last question of the questionnaire referred to whether students believe or not that translation hinders language acquisition. 34 students agree that translation should be used as a tool and that they should try to reduce translation dependence gradually. The other 16 students see it as a valuable tool for language skills development. The students in the first group acknowledge the vital role played by communicative activities since they help them develop their fluency, confidence and communicative competence. The students in the second group describe communicative activities as requiring spontaneous use of the language, which may lead to mistakes and embarrassing situations.

6. Strategies to limit the use of translation in ESP classes

1. Use of authentic materials

In order to minimize the use of translation in ESP classes, teachers can use real-world materials such as articles, reports and videos that are commonly used in the engineering field. They show students how to use terms and expressions in natural contexts, without making use of translation.

2. Prioritize contextual meaning

ESP students should be encouraged to acquire new vocabulary through context rather than direct translation. In this way, students learn how to grasp the meaning of new words in various situations.

3. Encourage the use of English – English dictionaries

English – English dictionaries often offer greater long-term benefits for language acquisition and fluency than translation tools, which do not always give exact translations and which may lead to confusion and errors.

4. Use of immersion techniques

A language rich environment encourages learners to think directly in English and to reduce their need for translation, which makes their communication sound more natural.

5. Use of methods which encourage interactive learning

Such activities as role-playing, simulations and pair/group projects encourage students to use English in real-life situations.

6. Use of visual aids

Many technical terms refer to complex concepts which are challenging both for the ESP teacher who, in most cases, is not a specialist in the engineering field, and for many ESP students who may lack the technical knowledge required for their

understanding. Visual aids provide visual context aimed at clarifying the meaning of the term.

7. Encourage the use of English engineering resources

Repeated exposure to authentic engineering content such as engineering websites, podcasts and tutorials can help students learn naturally, minimizing their reliance on translation.

7. The role of translation in the workplace

Many engineers operate in bilingual and even multilingual environments, which is why translation skills are a necessity rather than an option. It supports teamwork, increasing efficiency and reducing the risk of errors. Engineering projects involve research papers, technical reports, operational procedures and safety instructions which need to be correctly understood by all stakeholders. Misinterpretation of strict safety and legal requirements that many engineering fields have to comply with might lead to serious legal issues. Translation is the best tool that can be used to ensure their accurate interpretation.

Since engineering is a constantly evolving field, translation ensures engineers' access to new research which allows them to keep up with technical developments. It may also encourage them to become part of international research and development projects.

As it has already been pointed out, if not managed properly, translation may have a negative impact on engineers' professional activity. Reliance on AI-based translation tools can result in errors in technical documentation, generating inaccurate and even awkward translations. Confidential information could be exposed if it is handled by insecure AI tools. In modern international workplaces, especially in sectors such as engineering and technology, employees in key positions are expected to possess at least a minimum level of proficiency in English. This requirement is not a mere formality; it is essential for ensuring effective communication, coordination and performance.

In the age of digital tools, people from all professions increasingly turn to automated translators to help them understand complex, field-specific materials. These tools can be particularly effective when dealing with lengthy documents that might otherwise be inaccessible to speakers with limited language proficiency. Automated translation tools have some advantages over human translators. First of all, they can translate instantly large volumes of text. Secondly, they are usually free or cheaper than human translators. Thirdly, they are very good as far as basic communication is concerned. While automated translation offers some benefits, it also comes with a lot of drawbacks, especially if it is used for critical documents or if translations are not proofread manually. Automated translation tools are far from offering accurate translations. They translate word-for-word instead of taking into account the meaning of the whole sentence, which leads to mistranslations. Cultural nuances are not recognized, industry-specific jargon is not mastered, grammar and sentence structure are not always correct, the result being unnatural, incoherent sentences.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, the importance of translation for ESP acquisition cannot be overstated because it plays a crucial role in helping students master technical and professional language skills. It facilitates comprehension of specialized vocabulary, bridges the gap between theory and practice, supports faster retention and reduces miscommunication in professional settings. Yet, balancing translation with communicative approaches in ESP is highly beneficial because in this way both accuracy and practical language use are improved.

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