

A CASE FOR THE USE OF TRANSLATION IN ESP CLASSES

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Abstract: This article is a plea for the use of translation as a teaching method in the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) class in general and the ESP (English for Specific Purposes) class in particular, by highlighting its advantages, as revealed by recent research in the field. Translation as a teaching method was associated for a long time with the Grammar Translation method, and fell from grace sometime in the mid-20th century, where it remained until recently. Despite this marginalization, in EFL, many teachers have been quietly using both L1 (mother tongue) for explanations and translation as a supplemental teaching method. Its value has been reasserted by numerous recent theorists and their research. They have demonstrated repeatedly, as this paper will attest, that translation exercises have undisputed value if used pertinently and efficiently, and if prepared with specific goals in mind. Thus, for several years now, translation has regained its legitimate place in the teaching of English and has re-emerged as a useful tool in this endeavour. In English for Specific Purposes (ESP), its usefulness is even more appreciated, as this paper will propose. The purpose of this article is twofold. The first part is a presentation of the latest research regarding the use of L1 in the classroom and the issue of translation employed as a learning technique, with a review of the relevant literature. The second part refers specifically to ESP and to the particularities of this branch of EFL, offering a few suggestions for types of translation activities and ways in which they can be useful in such classes. The aim is to bring evidence that translation is neither old nor obsolete, but a valid teaching method that helps learners by consolidating difficult grammar issues, clarifying confusing aspects, enriching vocabulary and generally improving their knowledge of English.

Keywords: ESP; translation; terminology; teaching method; skill

1. Introduction

Once the Grammar Translation method was universally acknowledged as obsolete and inefficient, both translation and the use of L1 were exiled to the fringe of the domain of language teaching. However, in recent years, more and more theorists and professionals in the field of language learning have advocated for the use of L1 and translation, offering numerous reasonable arguments in this regard. Though all the criticism of the Grammar Translation method may have been justified in terms of how the method was implemented a hundred years ago, all the theories and methodologies developed in the meantime have inevitably left their mark on the teaching of English today. In fact, most teachers borrow useful elements from various methods (audio-lingualism, PPP – Presentation, Practice

And Production, CLT – Communicative Language Teaching, TBL – Task-based learning, humanistic approach, lexical approach, or corpus-based approach) depending on their experience in the classroom and the type of learners. Thus, given this influence, the use of translation in class today may result in a completely different experience than what the Grammar Translation method used to be.

2. Translation in the EFL class – new arguments and recent research

The recent and extensive research into the use of L1 and translation in the classroom has reiterated, again and the again, the main points of interest, namely that these two concepts have been traditionally and erroneously equated to the Grammar Translation method, that L1 is widely used in classrooms all over the world, though not openly admitted, and that there are many advantages to translation if used properly in class. Historically, the ‘troubles’ started with the unsatisfactory results of the Grammar Translation method in terms of language acquisition. Its main criticisms were that it was not concerned with oral communication skills, it lacked interaction, being a teacher-centred approach, and thus did not encourage creativity and spontaneity (Sapargul and Sartor, 2010: 27). Translation was also considered an artificial and restrictive exercise, counterproductive, forcing dependence on L1, purposeless and with no application in the real world, frustrating and de-motivating (seemingly designed to elicit mistakes rather than encourage) and generally not suited for the average learner (Carreres, 2006).

The consequence was a radical position, namely various methods that “tried to encourage authentic communication and improve language teaching” (Sapargul and Sartor, 2010: 27). All these eventually united in the 1980s under the banner of the Communicative Approach which practically banned the use of L1 and translation in the classroom. The Communicative method, a learner-centred method, successfully ruled the realm of English teaching for many years. In summary, the proponents of the communicative methods “firmly believed that the use of the mother tongue was counter-productive in the process of acquiring a new language, and that therefore the use of translation in the classroom could do more damage than good, holding back learners from taking the leap into expressing themselves freely in the second language” (Carreres, 2006). However, both L1 and translation have often been employed in EFL classes over the years, in spite of the strong stigma associated with them, as David Owen remarks: “Why is there still that lingering sense of having done something wrong when, as teachers, we make use of translation in our classes?” (Owen, 2003). Resorting to L1 or translation has long been regarded as a personal failure of the teacher due to the association with the Grammar Translation method which was rejected as a relic of the past, a joke even (Atkinson, 1987: 242). However, a movement started in the 1990s to bring translation back into the conversation.

E.R. Auerbach, like other theorists (Popovic, 2001), points that there is no conclusive evidence to justify the use of English only in the classroom (Auerbach, 1993: 6) and elaborates on the subject showing that the results depend on the age of the learners, as well as their degree of literacy, and also on the skill and openness of the teacher toward this activity, I might add. In fact, the complete rejection of the use of mother tongue and translation in the classroom is neither reasonable nor justified for many reasons. An important argument in this regard is

that all students translate mentally (Duff, 1994, quoted in Dagiliene, 2012: 125; Cook, 2001: 417), especially in elementary levels, but not only, and using L1 comes naturally, as Jeremy Harmer points: “when we learn a foreign language we use translation almost without thinking about it, particularly at elementary and intermediate levels” (Harmer, 2001: 131). The rigid elimination of the use of L1 in the classroom is not a solution, nor a guarantee for the improvement of language acquisition (Mattioli, 2004: 25), especially since it is the learners’ preference to use it (Atkinson, 1987: 242; Tudor, 1987: 269). Numerous case studies and surveys conducted by various researchers over time show the same statistical results and lead to the same conclusions: the learners want to use L1 and translations are helpful in the classroom. Schweers’s study (Schweers, 1999) is the most referenced in this regard, but other researchers have conducted their own surveys: Carreres, 2006; Liao, 2006; Kavaliauskienė and Kaminskienė, 2007; Kavaliauskienė, 2009; Dagiliene, 2012; Calis and Dikilitas, 2012; Xhemaili, 2013; Fernández-Guerra, 2014; Mollalei et al, 2017. Some learners, depending on cultural background, are very resistant to the Communicative method and downright reject it, as is the case of Taiwanese and other Asian students (Savignon and Wang, 2003). Moreover, the banning of L1 is also a rejection of the learners’ identity and culture, as well as their expressed needs, therefore the human element is disregarded to their detriment (Harboard, 1992, quoted in Mattioli, 2004: 25, Auerbach, 1993: 14).

Apart from the reactions and opinions of the learners in the various surveys, there are demonstrated features that directly contradict the characterizations made by those who reject the use of translation in class, as enumerated in detail by Atkinson, 1987: 243-246; Atkinson, 1993: 53; Cook, 2001: 410-419; Owen, 2003; and Fernández-Guerra, 2014: 155-156. Thus, contrary to the general belief, translation as a teaching method is communicative, as Ana B. Fernández-Guerra suggests: “as a communicative act, TILT [*translation in language teaching*] can expose FL students to various text types, registers, styles, contexts, etc. that resemble the way languages are used in real-life for communicative purposes.” (2014: 155). Another point made by researchers on this topic is that translation used as a teaching technique requires the use of authentic materials, is interactive, learner-centred, and promotes learner autonomy (Mahmoud, 2006: 30), which are also important qualities in ESP.

Another significant aspect of this method is remarked by David Atkinson. According to him, some of the benefits of using translation activities are that they force learners to think about meaning, not just manipulate forms mechanically, allow learners to think comparatively, encourage them to take risks, and are a real-life activity (the learners may need to translate in their job) (Atkinson, 1993: 53-54). Thinking comparatively, understanding the non-parallel nature of languages and the fact that there is no perfect correspondence between two languages are major points made by most of the research on this matter (Mattioli, 2004: 24; Kavaliauskienė and Kaminskienė, 2007: 134; Fernández-Guerra, 2014: 155). The lack of correspondence between L1 and L2, in addition to the positive and negative transfer between languages, enhances the understanding of L2 (Mahmoud, 2006: 30, quoting Van Els, 1984). By understanding the differences while doing contrastive analysis, the learners will acquire more knowledge of L2 (Ross, 2000) and increase their awareness of it (Dagiliene, 2012: 124), not only in terms of grammar but also in terms of pragmatic and stylistic devices (Owen, 2003), thus

promoting learning (Popovic, 2001). Translation is useful to compare grammar, syntax, word order, vocabulary and this helps learners activate language usage (Kavaliauskienė and Kaminskienė, 2007: 132), as Nigel J. Ross points:

The real usefulness of translation in the EFL classroom lies in exploiting it in order to compare grammar, vocabulary, word order and other language points in English and the student's mother-tongue. The areas where differences occur range from relatively small points such as 'false friends', through sizeable areas such as tense systems, to more complex fields such as contrastive rhetoric. (Ross, 2000)

If learners understand the differences, with the positive or negative transfer indicated punctually, interference will diminish: "Activities involving translation from the mother tongue [...] encourage students to make the important step of beginning to think not in terms of 'How does one say X in English?', but rather 'How can I express X in English?'" (Atkinson, 1987: 245).

Translation activities, if organized properly, can be used for various purposes, as David Atkinson proposes: cooperation among learners, reinforcement of recently explained items of grammar or vocabulary, checking for sense, and development of learning strategies (1987: 243-245). They can also enhance physical attributes such as memory and cognition, again contributing to the improvement of learning: "translation actually can be used as a cognitive, memory, affective, communicative, and compensatory learning strategy to boost learning effects" (Ali, 2012: 430). Translation practice promotes both analytic and synthetic thinking, developing the "skills of circumlocution, paraphrase, explanation, and simplification" (Atkinson, 1987: 245), and facilitating the learner's adaptation to various linguistic instances.

To sum up, the research into this matter, starting with the 1980s, has drawn comparable conclusions. On the one hand, the use of translation in class, as a teaching aid, is not to be confused with the Grammar Translation method of the early 20th century, and on the other hand, translation activities encourage communication, interactivity and the transfer of the thought process from L1 to L2. They also take into account learners' needs, develop important new skills and promote learning.

3. Considerations about the use of translation activities in the ESP class

The Communicative approach has been hailed as the best method to teach English because the development of skills is paramount and it offers learners the best chances to acquire a new language. Accuracy in terms of grammar, spelling or phonology are less relevant (Harmer, 2001: 84-86; Sapargul and Sartor, 2010: 27). There are, however, fields where accuracy matters and is actually vitally important, like science, for example. Science must communicate rigorous information through a reliable medium, as scientific experiments must be reproducible. Therefore, scientists need to be able to communicate with each other in correct terms. Apart from conferences and other similar contexts, most scientific communication is done through text, through the writing of reports and articles detailing experiments which are then published for the benefit of other scientists and the progress of knowledge in general.

Thus, in teaching scientific English, that is ESP for science students, it is very important to match their future needs. In science, like in several other fields, English is *lingua franca*, as most research is published in English. Language should not be a hindrance to researchers, but a tool to convey a clear message. If students of biology, ecology or agriculture are lucky to work in the fields that they are training for, they will need: 1) to read and write in English (articles, scientific papers, presentations, posters, projects, for which they will require a clear and accurate understanding of the text, both in English and in Romanian, and 2) to connect with other researchers – most likely via written correspondence, but also directly, through verbal communication.

When it comes to ESP, the question of purpose (Kic-Drgas, 2014: 256-257) and learners' needs is stronger than in EFL. Translation may not be suited for all learners, but it is very helpful in ESP where accurate equivalence, as well as work on authentic texts are required for the learners' needs. When students graduate and work in their field of choice, such activities may prove very useful as they will have a set of common phrases specific to that domain and to which they can always refer, as well as skills for further learning. They will be provided with a basic foundation, the tools needed to face new linguistic challenges in their future professional life. Thus, given the particular needs of these learners, many of the points made by researchers, and presented in the previous section, apply very well to ESP, a growing branch of EFL with distinct objectives.

However, when translation activities are planned for the ESP class, some factors need to be considered. In order to make them into a successful technique of language acquisition, the teacher should take into account, among other aspects, the learners' level of English, the learners' level of scientific knowledge, and their motivation to learn. For elementary levels, translation can be used to consolidate grammar, for intermediate and advanced levels, translation may be used to correct errors and point out interference and negative transfer (Newark, 1991, quoted by Ross, 2000; Popovic, 2001), in other words work on nuances and improve knowledge of L2. While most researchers agree that translations are most useful at elementary levels (Atkinson, 1987: 242), even learners with intermediate or advanced knowledge of L2 can reap benefits from this type of activity, especially in ESP, where just good command of English is not enough. Thus, translation can be integrated and emerge as a fifth skill (Ross, 2000; Fernández-Guerra, 2014: 155; Kic-Drgas, 2014: 258) alongside the other four: reading, writing, listening and speaking.

The second consideration mentioned above, namely the learners' scientific knowledge is specific to ESP and an important element required for the success of the translation activities. The more the students know about their domain, the easier it is for them to understand and learn specific formulations, phrases, collocations and other instances of English phraseology specific to the scientific text. However, in my experience, students' knowledge is not considerable, especially in the first year of tertiary education, when ESP is first taught, therefore this lack may be a hindrance. In such cases, the ESP class is an opportunity for learners to also enhance their scientific knowledge, to a small extent, however, and mainly as an encouragement to look for information themselves, as the job of the English teacher is neither to teach science, nor to have considerable knowledge of science.

The third issue, learners' motivation, is probably the most important and affects the successful implementation of any teaching activity. This is a complex topic, to which considerable research has been devoted, and which I also discussed in a previous paper: "While most of them [*students*] acknowledge the importance of being able to speak English, others dismiss it entirely, even though the course is designed using corpora and authentic information specific to their respective domains, and based on needs analysis and the range of possible jobs specific to the field of activity they train for." (Chirobocea, 2017: 364). Sometimes, the ESP teacher must face hostile attitudes on the part of students who, ignorant of reality, reject the inclusion of English in their scientific education. Others do not envisage themselves practicing science or being involved in a job that requires knowledge of English. Learners' motivation is also affected by the unequal level of English proficiency among a group. Separating the learners into groups according to their level of knowledge is often an unattainable goal for many teachers, me included, as such arrangements require space and time that are not available. Learners' motivation also fluctuates depending on the time of day the English class is scheduled, on the number of classes they had that day, and on subjective factors such as tiredness, hunger, emotional state and others which are usually disregarded when learning methods and techniques are proposed.

4. Objectives of translation activities in the ESP class

Various researches offer a multitude of examples of how translations can be used in class, and even entire course designs organized around translation activities (Laviosa and Cleverton, 2006: 7-11). Thus, some propose consolidation translations (Atkinson, 1993: 62) for grammar such as the progressive aspect, comparatives or false friends (Ross, 2000), or ideas for how to integrate translation into existing courses aided by pre- and post-translation activities (Popovic, 2001). Others propose the translation of definitions of terms (Kic-Drgas, 2014: 259-260), error correction through translation (Atkinson, 1993: 621) or by comparing different translations of the same text (Atkinson, 1993: 62), translation as post-reading activity (Mahmoud, 2006: 31-32) or back translating (Zhang & Gao, 2014), which consists of one group translating a text from L1 into L2, then giving the translation to a different group who will translate it back into L1, which leads to an analysis of the differences that will most certainly occur and to a discussion about why they occurred.

In my ESP classes, I have often employed most of the types of translation activities suggested above, as I noticed the students understood better certain elements of grammar or vocabulary when compared with L1 (Romanian). My experience with this method, over the years, has been largely successful. I also found that students pay special attention to these exercises compared to other activities. The context is tertiary education, English classes for students at the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences (biology, ecology, agriculture and horticulture). In this context, English is taught for two years (four semesters during the first two years), with one or two hours per week.

In terms of their advantages in class, what I noticed from my experience was that translation activities are particularly useful in the teaching and learning of specialized vocabulary, which represents an important part of ESP. They can be helpful in the introduction of new terminology. In such cases, there are two options:

either the terminology is given directly before the translations, as a list, with an explanation for each word or the L1 equivalent, or it is left to the students to look it up in dictionaries or glossaries of terms. The latter solution has advantages and disadvantages. Bilingual dictionaries of specific terminology are not widely available, nor do they even exist for certain branches of science. An alternative is the internet, which provides explanations for scientific terms, but where correct or complete equivalents in L1 are not available or reliable. The advantages in asking students to look up terms are interactivity, communication and teamwork, which encourage learning, both of English and of science. However, such an activity is time consuming, and time is often a luxury in the ESP class. Translations also help point out other specific elements of vocabulary such as false friends, synonymy, homonymy, polysemy, positive and negative transfer related to prefixes, suffixes or specific phraseology. Translation activities can serve very well as revision at the end of a particularly terminology-rich class. Carefully targeted translations help revise and consolidate the specialized vocabulary and work as a reminder in terms of both meaning and spelling.

A post-reading activity can also help introduce and understand new vocabulary, especially collocations, as well as other elements that construct meaning. For example, some phrases are taken from an English text and given in Romanian after the text. As a post-reading activity, the students are asked to read the text and look for the English equivalent for those phrases in the text. This activity works in the other direction as well, namely, certain portions of sentences that contain specific difficulties in English are taken out of the text and the students are asked to give a translation into Romanian. This type of activity, both from L1 into L2 and from L2 into L1, is more integrated and helpful with any type of language issue. It involves a more global understanding of the text, as well as awareness of specific elements that make the difference.

Just like in the case of vocabulary, translations can be used to reinforce or consolidate grammar at the end of a class, or immediately after the grammar issue is explained or encountered, depending on methodology. Though some students find even elementary translations difficult (the ESP class gathers learners with varying levels of English proficiency, from elementary to advanced, and it is difficult to cater for all needs), they do understand better the grammar issues when these are explained and practiced in comparison with L1. This works well when it comes to particularly difficult elements of English grammar that have no or different correspondent in L1 (Romanian, in this case): present perfect, the progressive aspect, 'be going to', definite article (enclitic in Romanian), modal verbs, 'it', specific word order, conditional rules, phrasal verbs, collocations and many others which are best exemplified by comparison. In such cases, the learners are taught that they have to rely on understanding the meaning and not on a verbatim translation in order to convey a message correctly.

For illustration, I will offer one of the many types of sentences I have been using in my English class for biology students for several years:

Când apare o sângerare, plachetele se adună formând trombusuri care funcționează ca un dop pentru a o opri.

Invariably, this example raises relatively the same problems with most students, year after year. The problematic issues are discussed and options are presented. This, like other similar examples, is an opportunity for the students to understand new terminology (bleeding / haemorrhage, platelet / thrombocyte, clot /

thrombus), to choose the best fit from a list of synonyms (appear, occur, happen, take place; work, function; cap, cork, plug), to practice the use of 'there is', to remember irregular plural (thrombus – thrombi), to recognize the reflexive and transitive nature of verbs (assemble, gather vs. collect, pick) and to practice the use of 'it', which I noticed to be often problematic for learners, given the lack of a Romanian correspondent. This is but a demonstration of how a simple example like the one above can lead to numerous discussions whose intent is to constantly revise and enrich vocabulary, access various aspects of language in contexts specific to the learners' domain and promote learning. A more practical approach will be the next step in my research, as I propose to design an experiment in the attempt to quantify more precisely how translation practice is specifically useful for learners in the ESP class.

5. Conclusion

As many valid sources have demonstrated, with surveys and classroom-tested methods, translation used as a teaching technique in EFL classes has legitimate value and does not hinder learning, on the contrary, it helps in this process, as Radmila Popovic concludes: "if a strong case for translation in the language classroom is to be made, at least three things ought to be demonstrated: that criticisms against it are not valid, that learners need it, and that it promotes their learning" (Popovic, 2001). Of course, results are best when the method is used judiciously, when the activities are well planned (Dagiliene, 2012: 126) and designed with the learners' needs in mind, especially when it comes to ESP: "the success of TILT lies in its correct use as a working and learning tool, with appropriate activities that help students to contrast their native and foreign languages, to improve their language skills, and to see the usefulness of the task" (Fernández-Guerra, 2014: 156). Or rather, as Vivian Cook puts it with the suggestions she offers for the success of the method, if we are going to use it, we might as well use it well (Cook, 2001: 418).

My own experience in the ESP class has only emphasized the validity of these theories and proved that many elements specific to the scientific text such as vocabulary and specialized terminology, word order, grammar or style can be more easily understood and further consolidated by learners through translation, which is, undeniably, a useful tool in the ESP class. The overview of the recent research on this topic, presented in this paper, highlighted the positive aspects of using translation in class and revisited this wrongly marginalized teaching method. It also listed a few types of translation activities and their possible uses in the ESP class, as they revealed their advantages in my classroom experience. In conclusion, given the arguments presented above and supported by the recent research on the topic, translation used as a teaching technique is useful and efficient, and should definitely be reconsidered as a valuable aid in the EFL class in general and the ESP class in particular, where the correct use of language in the accurate construction of the message have paramount importance.

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