

*Translation and Language Teaching in Higher Education:  
Shortcomings and Implications*

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**Abstract**

After many decades of being banished and marginalised in foreign language teaching, translation is gradually gaining momentum and being re-introduced as a viable activity in modern language degree courses. Such a shift is not an entirely problem-free though it can offer new opportunities in the field of language learning and teaching.

This paper aims at exploring some of the controversies surrounding the use of translation in language teaching and opening up the scope of reflection for more research in this area. It will also discuss the results drawn from a questionnaire completed by LMD 2 english students from the university of Tlemcen.

**Keywords:** language teaching, communicative translation, higher education, Lmd 2 English students, University of Tlemcen.

**ملخص**

نسعى من خلال هذا المقال إلى دراسة دور الترجمة ومكانتها في تعليم اللغة الأجنبية وخاصة الإنجليزية لدى طلبة الجامعة الجزائرية بصفة عامة، وجامعة تلمسان بصفة خاصة. فقد كانت الترجمة مستبعدة تماماً عن مقررات اللغات الأجنبية بالجامعة باعتبارها نشاطاً سلبياً يعيق تعلم اللغة لأنه يعتمد على منهجيات تقليدية تقوم على تعليم قواعد اللغة ومفرداتها بشكل حرفي. لكنها أصبحت تضطلع بدور هام وفعال بعد تخليها عن المنهجيات التقليدية لصالح المنهجيات الحديثة التي تقوم على الترجمة التواصلية التي تهدف إلى تحسين مهارات طلبة اللغة الأجنبية. إذ أصبحت الترجمة تفرض وجودها في جميع أقسام اللغات بالجامعة الجزائرية غير أنها لا تعنى بالقدر الكافي من الدراسات التي تضبط تدريسها.

سنحاول في هذه الدراسة أيضاً مناقشة نتائج استبيان أجريناه مع طلبة السنة الثانية انجليزية لجامعة تلمسان.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** تدريس اللغة، الترجمة التواصلية، التعليم العالي، طلبة السنة الثانية انجليزية، جامعة تلمسان.

**1.Introduction:**

Until recently, translation was out of favour with the language teaching community . It was regarded as ‘boring’, ‘pointless’, ‘irrelevant’ and the like. However, this negative attitude towards translation has amazingly changed in the last few decades and it is becoming recognised as an effective activity which can help students enhance and improve their four language skills (writing, reading, listening and speaking) and afford them the opportunity to enhance a fifth skill, namely, translation skill.

Despite the fact that the use of translation in foreign language teaching has been re-assessed, there is still a lack of empirical studies investigating the ways and the utility of using translation in foreign language teaching. Hence, House (2008, ) argues that one important reason for the controversy about translation in the language classroom is the lack of a thorough theoretical understanding of the nature of translation.

In this paper, we would like to show that there are a number of good reasons for teacher and policy makers to involve translation in language teaching in higher education, provided that they think hard about how to re-assess its role and go about doing it.

**Why do language learners really need translation ?**

There is a strong relationship between translation and foreign language teaching. Leonardi (2010 , 17) stresses the fact that, ‘Whereas translators tend to be viewed as good bilinguals and life-long language learners, language learners are meant to be natural translators who face this activity everyday as students and workers.’

Translation in this regard is not only appropriate for training translators. It can also afford the language learners the opportunity to profit from many applications in their language skills, particularly translation skill.

Moreover, there may be at least three reasons behind benefiting from translation skill in the field of language education:

1/ Many language specialists though not translators may ‘ enter professions in which a basic understanding of the processes involved in professional trans-

lation may be useful. '

2/ language students may have to resort to translation as a professional activity if they don't find the kind of job they had idealised.

3/ The current trend in university education leads to generality with later specialization ; so, it is important to prepare students for later specialisation in the domain of translation. We can take the example of english students in the university of tlemcen who are preparing a master degree in translation, tourism and cultural heritage.

### **Is translation good or bad for language teaching?**

The use of translation in foreign language teaching is perceived differently by linguists, teachers and scholars provoking a great deal of disagreement and criticism.

This is due to the fact that most of them still consider translation as an inadequate reminder of old teaching methodologies associated with the grammar translation method. Therefore, several scholars and language teachers argue that translation should be avoided in the language classroom stating a number of arguments and assumptions against the use of translation as a language teaching tool.

Malmkjaer (1998 , 6) summarises the main reasons why translation fell from favour in language education:

- 1 / Translation is independent and radically different from the skills which define language competence : reading, writing, speaking and listening.
- 2/ Translation takes up valuable which could be used to teach these four skills.
- 3/ translation is unnatural.
- 4/ translation misleads and prevents students from thinking in the foreign language.
- 5/ Translation is a bad exercise for language skills.
- 6/ Translation produces interference.
- 7/ translation is only appropriate for training translators.

It is worth mentioning that despite these and similar arguments against the use of translation in language teaching, the issue of whether translation

is useful or not in the language classroom is still a controversial one and it captures the interest of a good number of scholars and theorists.

According to Popovic (2001, 6), '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.'

To justify this assumption, we have to consider some counter-arguments that have been put forward to address the afore-mentioned objections :

1/ Translation is not independent of the four language skills since an accurate translation always requires a great deal of reading, writing, speaking and listening. Not only this, if well designed, translation activities can be used to enhance the four skills and develop accuracy, clarity and flexibility (Duff, 1989 :7).

2/ language learners attempt unconsciously to translate, 'translation/ transfer is a natural phenomenon and an inevitable part of 2nd language acquisition'(Harbord, 1992 : 351). Moreover, it is a communicative and real-life activity that naturally occurring in the real world. As Duff(1989 :6) puts it, 'translation happens everywhere, all the time, so why not in the classroom ?'.

3/ Translation doesn't prevent students from thinking in the foreign language, rather they are requested to think in both languages. As a matter of fact, this increases their awareness of similarities and differences between the two languages and enables them to understand that translation activities aim not only at finding one-to-one correspondence but achieving equivalence semantically, functionally and pragmatically.

4/ Translation has been recognised as a truly interdisciplinary field of study (Munday, 2001 : 181). As a result, it cannot be considered only appropriate for training translators, but 'should be a major aim and means of language learning' (Cook, 2010 : xv). By the same token, Malmkjaer argues that, 'since a number of language learners end up as translators, there is no reason why the skill of translating (properly understood) should not have a place in the language learning classroom.'(Malmkjaer, 2010 : 187)

**Questionnaire analysis: How do learners perceive translation in their language degree?**

The questionnaire used in this study has been completed by 30 English learners from the university of Tlemcen. All of them were 2nd year students and they have attended two semesters in the second year, i.e we asked them to answer the questionnaire after they had about at least twenty lecture of translation. It is important to mention that they have only one translation course in the second year 'translation techniques'. The content of this course is very extensive dealing with translation history, translation techniques and translation practice through a wide variety of texts : literary, political, scientific...etc

The first very obvious shortcoming that can be noticed regarding the syllabus lies in the fact that it tends to condense a wide variety of contents and activities into a relatively short span of time.

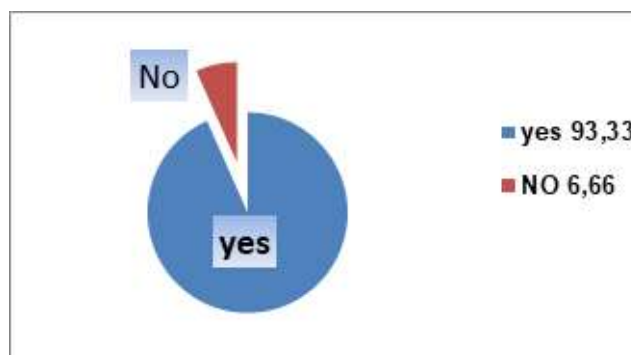
Before revealing the results drawn from the questionnaire, we should admit that the sample was not really representative regarding the number of 2nd year students, but as we mentioned above the main concern of the study is to open the scope for more investigation and research.

The following table summarises the results of the questionnaire and presents them in percentages because most of them deals with 'yes' or 'no' responses.

Questions	Percentages %
1/ Should translation be taught as part of a languages undergraduate degree Yes no	Yes :93,33 % No :6,66 %
2/ How do you rate the importance of the course of translation in your curriculum 1 _Of a big importance 2 _Important 3 _Not important	1 : 23,33 % 2 : 73,33 % 3 : 3,33 %
3/ Is translation from English into Arabic useful as a means of learning English?	Yes :76,66 % No :23,33 %

4/ Is translation from Arabic into English useful as a means of learning English?	Yes :63,33 % No :36,66 %
5/Do you think you could make faster progress in the aforementioned area through different means (e.g. in a more general language class, in a literature seminar, through reading, watching films, etc.)?	Yes :80 % No :20 %
6/ Do you feel that translation lectures you have attended in the module of translation techniques have prepared you for the professional practice of translation?	Yes :80 % No :20 %
7/ Do you think that it is important to give you an opportunity for more practice ?	Yes :93,33 % No :6,66 %
8/ Do you enjoy translation lectures ?	Yes :86 ,66 % No :13,33 %

The students' responses to the first question were very striking in that 28 out of the 30 respondents believe that translation should be taught as part of a foreign language degree. This means that they are aware of the increasing importance of translation as a relevant component in the foreign language syllabus.



*Figure 1 illustrates students' perception of translation as a part of language degree*

The responses to the 2nd question come to emphasise the first assumption and can serve as a clear indicator that learners unambiguously perceive translation as important and conducive to language learning. Surely, it is not more important than learning the language but they consider it important enough to be integrated in the language classroom.

When asked about the usefulness of translation as a tool of learning english in terms of direction of translation in questions (3) and (4), we observe that the number of the respondents who are for inverse translation exceeds the number of those who are for direct translation.

We can notice another shortcoming regarding the direction of translation for which there is no clear criteria. Students rely on their preferences and they are free to translate into Arabic or into French.

In question (5) where students were asked whether they thought they could make faster progress through other methods, 80% gave a positive answer. This means that they don't have clear assumption of the usefulness of translation and that they just take for granted since most of them believe they could improve through other methods.

Though students had only one module of translation, 80% of the respondents question (6) felt that it had prepared them for professional translation. This constitutes another shortcoming since one module is not enough to equip the students with the necessary toolkit to face professional translation tasks.

The responses to question (7) seem to be refreshing in that 93,33 % thought it is important to give them an opportunity for more practice. If well done, it would be very fruitful for 26 out of 30 students found that translation are enjoyable according to the responses to question (8).

### **Implications: What and how should we teach?**

When we look at the literature on translation and language teaching, we notice that the question of whether translation can be used or not in the language classroom has been largely replaced by how we can best teach it. Thus

the way translation is taught makes a difference and plays a major role in determining the usefulness of this activity in language teaching and learning.

In this regard, malmkjaer argues that translation, if taught in a way that resembles the real life activity of translating, can bring into play the four basic language skills and yield benefits in L2 acquisition.

It is important to realise that learners need to be provided with translation activities that tend to be similar to those involved in the actual practice of translation.

It is worth noting that almost all scholars seem to be in agreement that translation can be relevant to the study of a foreign language only if it is applied within the communicative paradigm. Hence, it should be a communicative real life activity and cannot be done out of context.

Nolasco and Arthur (1995 :59) argue that translation activities pursued in an EFL classroom ought to meet the following criteria :

- Language is used for a purpose,
- They create a desire for communication,
- They encourage students to be creative and contribute their ideas,
- Students are focused on what they are saying rather than how they are saying it,
- Students work independently of the teacher,
- Students determine what they want to say or write.

Another emphasis regarding the relevance of translation should be placed on the choice of material. Duff (1990 :10) suggests that the good material 'should represent customary usage in both written and spoken language, should cover the full range of styles and registers, should be general rather than specialised, should be easy to understand, should be interesting and possible to translate'.

This means that translation in the language classroom is not an activity done at random, but it requires careful preparation on the part of the teacher and the learner. Besides there should be a clear relationship between theory and practice so that students will not notice the gap and lose the interest of



dealing with translation.

**Concluding remarks:**

- Translation undoubtedly has place in the language classroom and the arguments for its use outweigh those against it.
- Translation continues to attract many language learners who believe that they may become good translators for 'many lovers of language love to translate'. (Malmkjaer, 1998 :45)
- Translation can be proved to be fruitful in language education only if it is practised within a communicative framework.
- Undergraduate language learners are not supposed to become professional translators, rather, they acquire the basic knowledge that can help them to enter the domain of translation for example in postgraduate degrees.
- Translation is an effective and inevitable activity in language teaching but more empirical investigation is needed to explore how to administer it properly just like a medicine 'which will have a beneficial effect only when properly administered and in the right dose'. (Malmkjaer et al, 1998 :)

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