

Applicability of Translation in English for Specific Purposes Context: Students' Perception

Galina Koteva*

University of Chemical Technology and Metallurgy, Sofia, Bulgaria

Received 05 July 2020, Accepted 24 October 2020

ABSTRACT

This paper aims at highlighting the outcome of a survey carried out on students of English at the University of Chemical Technologies and Metallurgy - Sofia in the spring semester of 2020. The survey hinged on the usefulness of translation in the teaching of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) at university level and consisted of six questions proposed to thirty-two students in their 6th semester. Students were requested to express their opinions about the possible positive influence of translation as a useful tool in their ESP learning process, on the basis of their experience in foreign language classes. After a brief introduction dealing with some scholarly opinions about translation as a pedagogical tool, the survey is described, and its results are made visible through 6 bar graphs, showing that students generally considered translation as a useful pedagogical instrument in their foreign language studies, particularly as far as vocabulary acquisition and professional language practice are concerned.

Keywords: foreign language learning, ESP, translation.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most controversial issues in teaching foreign languages is still the use of translation in class. Different scholars argued that translation causes interference when teaching a foreign language. On the other hand, many other researchers argue that translation can be used as a practical tool in order to achieve different objectives in class. Previous studies mainly focused on translation for vocabulary learning, but in this work the perceptions of students with regard to translation will be analyzed in order

to explore the other beneficial aspects that the implementation of translation could bring. Many researchers highlight the use of translation as a mechanism not only to present new language, but also to reinforce previous language notions. Contrastive analysis, implied in translation, is considered beneficial for students because they can understand the meaning of sentences even when they do not have a broad vocabulary register. Besides, students are able to deeply understand the grammar rules of the target and source languages by comparing the structure of both sentences in a meaningful context.

**Correspondence to: Galina Koteva, University of Chemical Technology and Metallurgy, 8 Kliment Ohridski, Sofia 1756, Bulgaria, E-mail: kotevag@uctm.edu.*

Theoretical background

The main arguments and assumptions that have been provided against the use of translation as a language teaching tool could be summarized as follows:

- Translation has nothing to do in a communicative approach to language teaching [1] because it is an artificial exercise in which the main emphasis is on reading and writing and students do not practice oral skills.
- Translation involves the use of two languages thus depriving students of opportunities to receive sufficient foreign language input, since students spend time using their mother tongue, instead of practicing the foreign language.
- Translation makes learners view the foreign language through their native language and this can cause interference between the two languages involved.
- Translation is a boring and non-stimulating task [1], and can be particularly de-motivating for students.

The issue, whether translation can or cannot be useful, however, is still a controversial one, and it may be said to attract the attention of a good number of theorists and practitioners nowadays. In contrast to the above notions, a revival of translation tasks in foreign language classrooms seems to have been taking place over the last years. Other scholars [2] claim that translation is indeed an act of communication across languages and cultures, but it is a naturally occurring activity that takes place in the real world. As Duff states “translation happens everywhere, all the time, so why not in the classroom?” [1]. In addition, as a communicative act, translation can expose students to various text types, registers, styles, contexts, etc., that resemble the way languages are used in real-life for communicative purposes.

Moreover, translation can be used to enhance the four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking and develop accuracy, clarity and flexibility. As a matter of fact, translation is sometimes considered the fifth skill, alongside the

four other skills and, therefore, it can be a valuable tool to develop and improve communicative competence. Besides, as Cook puts it, “being able to translate is a major component of bilingual communicative competence” [3].

Also, translation practice can raise students’ awareness of the foreign language as well as of their own language and thus make them realize that there is not a perfect one-to-one correspondence between the two languages. So, students can understand the problematic nature of translation and learn to compare grammar, vocabulary, word order and other language points in English and their mother tongue. In fact, most translation tasks require students to reflect on how to achieve equivalence semantically, functionally and pragmatically, so they can put their efforts in trying to look for adequacy and appropriateness for the communicative purpose defined in a specific translation assignment. In the end, translation can be a valuable skill to be mastered.

Translation is useful in the English foreign language classroom in order to compare grammar, vocabulary, word order and other language points in English and the students’ mother tongue. The act of translating words is natural in language learners, particularly at a beginner’s level, but it is persistent through the highest levels as well. The present work aims at finding the positive influence translation may have in language learning in a professional setting. The purpose of this paper is to identify research outcomes and evidence of the usefulness of translation in teaching English as a foreign language at the University of Chemical Technologies and Metallurgy - Sofia. The most important question to be answered is whether or not translation should be considered as an effective strategy in order to teach ESP.

Methodology of the research

The survey aimed at finding the general opinion of 32 chemical engineering students of an ‘English for Special Purposes’ module who used specialized translation as part of their curriculum

in ESP which included reading texts from authentic sources, language work concentrating on vocabulary acquisition, translating texts dealing with their scientific area, listening activities to understand conversational English, and speaking tasks to develop oral skills through problem-solving activities, etc. A questionnaire containing 6 questions was administered to the students who were requested to answer anonymously. Three of the questions provided a selection of eight answers to choose from and the percentage was presented in the table (answers exceed 100 % because more than one answer could be selected) and the other three questions required rating according to a 1 to 5 scale, 1 meaning “I strongly disagree” and 5 meaning “I strongly agree.” The mean grade of each statement was then presented graphically with a bar chart.

Analysis of the results

The following section will describe the survey that aimed at assessing students’ attitudes towards translation tasks in their English learning classrooms. The study included 6 questions that focused on three main aspects, namely, (i) students’ preferred language learning tasks, (ii) the usefulness of translation tasks, and (iii) the difficulties students encountered when translating from English into Bulgarian.

The aim of the first question Q1 (Table 1) was to establish the place of translation activities among other language teaching activities. Almost

all participants agreed with the view that using their native language within translation tasks is beneficial for the acquisition of the foreign language. Students also agreed on the fact that translation helps to contrast the students’ native language with the foreign language, so that by comparing and contrasting their mother tongue with the target language their language awareness rises. As Cook points out, translation is not the only aim of language learning, but “should be a major aim and means of language learning” [3] since we cannot consider both of them (translating and language learning) as separate skills or as independent fields of study.

Among preferred language learning activities students highly value online exercises and presentations. Students clearly tend to display favorable attitudes towards activities they find motivating, even if these are not carried out in the classroom (online work is done mainly for homework). One could also perceive that among the types of activities students point out as favorable are activities related to speaking and comprehension.

The Table 2 (Q2) presents students’ responses regarding the beneficial aspects of translation. The majority of students relate translation with learning new vocabulary (97 %) which is understandable in view that in ESP courses the focus is mainly on terminology and specificities of authentic texts from the professional subject area. Second most important is the knowledge about the specific scientific area which is an

Table 1. Which are your preferred language learning activities?

Q 1	Preferred language learning activities	%
A.	Reading texts with comprehension exercises	88
B.	Language work dealing with vocabulary	74
C.	Translation of texts with focus on terms	86
D.	Listening activities to grasp meaning	62
E.	Online tasks	96
F.	Speaking tasks	62
G.	Problem-solving activities	54
H.	Presentations	90

Table 2. Which do you think are the beneficial aspects of translation?

Q 2	Beneficial aspects of translation	%
A.	Learning new vocabulary	97
B.	Contrastive analysis to compare language structures	68
C.	Broaden previous language knowledge	53
D.	Revise grammar rules	80
E.	Practice syntax and lexical structures	35
F.	Practice language	100
G.	Improve text comprehension	76
H.	Acquire knowledge about specific scientific area	94

important sub-competence that needs to be mastered in a language course for engineering students. Generally, translation is viewed as a useful language practice where students are able to revise grammatical, lexical and pragmatic issues and become more fluent in their second language expertise.

Translation always makes learners view the foreign language through their native language. Foreign language learners have a natural tendency to use translation and will automatically compare both languages involved, so it is pointless to try to avoid their internal thinking in L1 and code-switching between L1 and L2, since it is regarded as naturally developmental [4]. Translation does not necessarily cause negative interference by the native language, and it does not hinder foreign language learning at all. On the contrary, it increases students' awareness of similarities and differences between the two languages, promoting their acquisition of difficult structures

and elements in the foreign language and helps students to enhance their L2 learning.

The next question - Q3 (Table 3) is intended to find out why translation activities are viewed as effective learning practice. Among the most highly ranked answers are practicing of the written language and the comparison between the two language systems which can be useful to establish the similarities and differences between the two languages and thus raise students' awareness of the specificities of the foreign language. One of the disadvantages of translation activities is that they are not efficient for teaching speaking and listening skills. This drawback may be overcome if discussions about the translation are held in English or if translation activities are combined with some listening exercises about the subject area. What students definitely agree is that translation activities are important for improving comprehension and, moreover, they can be very useful if the texts are authentic and related to the

Table 3. Do you think translation can be effective practice to learn a foreign language?

Q 3	Translation activities as effective practice to learn a foreign language	Mean grade
A.	They improve reading comprehension	3.4
B.	They are good practice of the written language	4.2
C.	They are not efficient for oral and listening skills	3.5
D.	They are efficient only for advanced learners	2.8
E.	They are only useful for those who like them	2.2
F.	They give the chance to compare languages	4
G.	They are useful only if related to the professional area	3.6
H.	They give insight about stylistic and socio-cultural aspects of language	1.2

Table 4. What do you think of translation activities?

Q 4	Your attitude to translation activities	Mean grade
A.	Using both native and foreign language is helpful for comprehension	4.8
B.	Translation deals with all aspects of the foreign language	4.6
C.	Translation tasks are very useful for language acquisition	3.4
D.	Translation activities are entertaining and fun	2.8
E.	Translation is a skill on its own and needs to be developed	3.2
F.	Translation is a useful practice of the language	4.8
G.	Translation helps to contrast the native with the foreign language	4.4
H.	Translation can be boring and non-dynamic	2.4

professional area of the future engineers. Thus, translation can be used as a means to improve students' analytical skills and problem-solving strategies, and as a means to interact and practice language skills when commenting or discussing the problems encountered in translations.

Another important question Q4 (Table 4) is the attitude of students to translation tasks. Translation tasks do not necessarily have to be boring or demotivating for students. On the contrary, students view them as helpful and useful and more students consider them entertaining than boring and non-dynamic. So, the success of using translation as a learning tool lies in the use of appropriate activities [5] that help

students to contrast their native and foreign languages, to improve their language skills, and to see the usefulness of the task. Regardless of the student's language level, translation can be a very successful tool for a comparative study of both languages: beginners find it useful because of the use of their native language for assistance, and advanced learners can benefit from working with the subtleties of the relationship between both languages and from the problem-solving potential of translation for discussions.

An interesting aspect of the attitude to translation activities (Q5) shown in Table 5, is what advantages and disadvantages students may encounter. So far, we have already discussed

Table 5. What do you like and dislike about translation?

Q 5	Advantages and disadvantages of translation tasks			
	Advantages	%	Disadvantages	%
A	Development of practical language skills	46	Not all language skills are covered	34
B	Contrast the two languages	24	The native language may interfere	25
C	Use of authentic materials and learning of practical terminology	16	Useful as a complementary method only	19
D	Dynamic and entertaining	9	Boring and lacks communication	15
E	Other skills are developed, too (use of computer tools)	5	Lack of proper dictionaries	7

Table 6. What are the main problems you have when translating from English into Bulgarian?

Q 6	Most common problems encountered with translation	Mean grade
A.	Grammatical issues	3.4
B.	Problems due to the different linguistic systems	4.2
C.	Problems related to the subject-matter of the text	2
D.	Register problems: standard and non-standard language	1
E.	Stylistic problems	0.8
F.	Lack of appropriate dictionaries	2.6
G.	Lack of enough time	3.2
H.	Inability to use online resources	0.2

the advantages, the most important being the development of practical language skills as well as the use of authentic materials in a dynamic and entertaining environment. On the opposite end, we can see that the use of too much native language may be a serious drawback, though this can be beneficial for the native language of the students which also needs to be developed in the specific area. Also, the lack of communication should be compensated with some vocabulary learning preliminary exercises or any listening tasks, such as interviews or short videos related to the subject matter which can make the learning process more dynamic and entertaining.

Finally, Table 6 (Q6) presents students' responses on the main difficulties encountered when translating from English into Bulgarian. Eight types of problems were pointed according to the different sub-competences students should have in order to translate. As expected, the most problematic are the differences between the two language systems which can cause problems in finding the right translation equivalent in the target language. Also, grammar and terminology are viewed as problematic but these are dependent on the level of language proficiency and can be easily resolved with more practice. Lack of time is a big issue since translation is accepted as a supplementary activity to learning the language and thus less time is appointed to it, which leads to misinterpretations or inconsistencies. Also, the

specific subject-matter of the text may require to look for specialized dictionaries or making terminological databases which also takes time.

To sum up, students' attitudes towards translation as a learning tool were extremely positive because translation could help them acquire knowledge about the source and target language, improve knowledge of language registers and dialects, improve lexical knowledge, acquire more fluency and fastness in re-expression, improve their knowledge of pragmatic conventions, raise awareness of the differences between both linguistic systems, and improve grammatical knowledge. Translation has an important role to play in foreign language teaching, since it offers many beneficial issues to learners and, if properly designed, translation can be a very complete and useful task to carry out in the foreign language classroom.

CONCLUSIONS

Translation can be a useful tool to develop the four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking. On the whole, one can say that students show a very positive attitude towards translation and its potential, and as language learners, they have a positive belief about translation to promote, practice, and enhance their foreign language skills. The major findings of the study imply that students tend to display favorable

attitudes towards translation activities. When asked for their opinion on several activity types that normally take place in the classroom, students ranked translation tasks as very beneficial and motivating activities which can be useful not only to improve their language learning now, but also in the future, for their professional life.

REFERENCES

1. A. Duff, Translation, Oxford University Press, 1989.
2. R. Popovic, The Place of Translation in Language Teaching, English Teaching. Forum 37, (2), 2001.
3. G. Cook, Translation in Language Teaching: An Argument for Reassessment, Oxford University Press, 2010.
4. G. Kavaliauskiene, L. Kaminskiene, Translation as a learning tool in English for specific purposes. Kalbotyra, 2007.
5. W. Wilss, The Science of Translation: Problems and Methods, Tübingen, Gunter Narr Verlag, 1982.