

# Teachers and Learners' Perceptions of Applying Translation as a Method, Strategy, or Technique in an Iranian EFL Setting

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## Abstract

It has been found that translation is an efficient means to teach/learn grammar, syntax, and lexis of a foreign language. Meanwhile, translation is good for beginners who do not still enjoy the critical level of proficiency in their target language for expression. This study was conducted to examine the teachers and learners' perceptions of employing translation in the foreign language classroom; i.e., the effects, merits, demerits, limitations, as well as its use as a method, strategy or technique. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to collect and analyze the data from graduate and undergraduate learners (n=56) and teachers (n=44), male and female, who responded to two questionnaires. Additionally, only the teachers were interviewed to gain richer insight into their perceptions and attitudes. According to the results of independent samples t-test, there was no significant difference between teachers and learners' attitude to applying translation as a method, strategy, or technique in learning a foreign language. Based on the interview results, some teachers believed that employing translation in the foreign language context was helpful but not constantly. They claimed that translation was only effective in teaching vocabulary and grammar apart from learners' proficiency level as it can clarify meaning. But some other teachers noted that mother tongue would interfere with learning foreign language; they considered translation as a time-consuming activity through which students cannot capture the exact meaning.

**Keywords:** Teacher & learner perception, Translation as method, Strategy or technique, English as a Foreign Language

## 1. Introduction

Some educators encourage learners to employ translation in their learning foreign languages whereas others do not. Using first language as a medium of instruction is considered effective by the former group whilst the latter orients towards a communicative approach to language learning where the second language should be regarded as a learning and instructional means. Thus, in the twentieth century of language teaching methodology, Cook (2001) believed that this opposing approach to L1 was evidently a prevailing factor. Practitioners not only emphasize the function of translation in second and foreign language learning but also consider it a reasonable kind of activity for ESL and EFL learners (Laviosa, 2011; Zanettin, 2009).

Some scholars and teachers treat translation as the fifth language skill, particularly at intermediate and advanced levels; therefore, it is characterized as the most significant social skill as it may facilitate understanding and communication among strangers in advanced levels of language learning. Regardless of how well students are at comprehending authentic listening or reading materials, the vast majority of them incline to translate from target language into source language mentally and vice versa; due to this fact, foreign language teachers have been aware of the prominent function of translation in language settings.

Occasionally, students benefit from mother tongue in the class, for example, if they are linguistically unable to activate vocabulary for a selected task. Whilst translation is taken into account as a natural phenomenon in learning a foreign or second language, code-switching between first and second language is realized as a natural development. Undoubtedly, the students will translate whatever teachers say or do in the class; their styles and abilities may influence the amount of L1 being used in the classroom setting. In the meantime, translation can be helpful for L2 acquisition since it is

interactive and learner-centered, uses authentic materials, and results in promoting learners' autonomy. In the venue of L1 is using in L2 classroom students' feelings must be realized.

A number of foreign language scholars might consider translation as a useful medium to assure a noteworthy writing exercise and students' comprehension; however, others might entirely discourage using the first language in the classroom (Liao, 2006). Malmkjar (1998) maintained that teachers are not strongly in favor of employing translation in language teaching. Since the twentieth century, an assumption of teaching foreign/second language without any reference to learners L1 has been developed by a growing number of theoretical works and practical methods in language teaching. According to Malmkjar (1998), teachers believed that translation of first language impedes the acquisition of second language.

Little attention has been given to the impact of individual differences on learners' attitudes towards it as well as the influences of learners' characteristics like ambiguity tolerance and risk-taking, even though a number of researchers have concerned the application of translation in language teaching. In research on learners' beliefs about learning a foreign language, researchers have proposed that learners' perceptions would likely affect how they adopt learning strategies in this regard (Horwitz, 1988; Wenden, 1987). There is a gap between what teachers consider to be important and what learners think to be helpful for their learning activities. Foreign language learners and teachers take different approaches to use translation in their learning and teaching activities. This is to say that most teachers treat translation unimportant in foreign language learning while learners insist on its positive role for comprehending, remembering, and producing a foreign language. Students believe that through translating simple text from target language to their mother tongue they will not only enhance their proficiency but also boost their confidence. In practice, they fail to perceive the interference of their native language.

To determine the role translation plays in teaching a foreign language the following research questions were taken into consideration:

1. What is the significance of difference between teachers and learners' perceptions of using translation in learning foreign languages as a method, strategy, or technique?
2. What is the difference between teachers and learners' attitude to employing translation in teaching/learning a foreign language?
3. What are the merits, demerits and limitations of applying translation in teaching foreign languages?

## 2. Review of Related Literature

### 2.1 Related Theories of Translation

Employing translation in foreign language classrooms is not a medium to train a translator but rather a means to assist learners in acquiring and developing their language knowledge and competence. There are tangible tracks of translation in language learning based on recent studies of applied linguistics. The objections to using translation in foreign language settings refer to a limited view of translation. This is to say that translation is a form of communication rather than structure manipulation. Klaudy (2003) discussed pedagogical translation as a tool of enhancing learners' proficiency; the use of such translation with the purpose of teaching a foreign language is associated with Grammar-Translation Method.

### 2.2 Translation as a Teaching Method

Translation is discerned as a long-lived method in learning and teaching foreign or second languages. Prior to emerging Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) in the nineteenth century, grammar had been underlined in language teaching through translation techniques that had been devised in the sixteenth century (Bowen, Madsen, & Hilferty, 1985). While GTM was dominant translation was utilized for better understanding and learning of grammatical use of the target language, i.e. meaning was provided through mother tongue translation. Then, it resulted in a wrong perception that fixed word to word or phrase to phrase translation was possible between first and second language.

Although a lot of language teachers have overlooked the role of L1 in foreign language teaching, most of language learners tend to use their L1 in learning a new language (Chamot, O'Malley, Küpper, & Impink-Hernandez, 1987; Naiman, Frohlich, Stern, & Todesco, 1978). During the 1970s and 1980s, in communicative methods using learners' mother tongue declined, so the collaboration of translation with the language learning faded out for years (Kavaliauskienė & Kaminskienė, 2007). Consequently, using L1 was gradually excluded in second/ foreign language learning classes.

In the present post-communicative approaches the potential strengths of utilizing translation as a method in the second or foreign language classrooms are as follows (Machida, 2011):

1. It naturally opens up more opportunities for the learners to focus on forms as well as the meaning of the context;
2. Working back and forth between source and target language may realistically bring not only discussion on linguistic and non-linguistic forms; but also explicit attention to form and meaning of the text,
3. Translating can supply learners the challenging activities such as problem-solving, and integrated linguistic,

cultural, and pragmatic knowledge beyond communicating by means of language.

### 2.3 Translation as a Strategy

"Strategy" refers to both conscious and unconscious procedure (Séguinot, 1991). He believes translators can benefit from at least three universal strategies in their classrooms:

- (i) Translating without interruption as far as possible;
- (ii) Leaving the stylistic or qualitative errors in the text to the revision stage.
- (iii) Correcting surface errors on the spot;

Lörscher (1991) states that translation can be considered as a conscious strategy for solving problems whilst we are translating a text from one language into another. To this end, translation strategies firstly recognize a problem and then find a solution to it.

As Krings (1986) depicts translation strategy can be concerned as a translator's conscious plans to solve tangible translation problems in the framework of a tangible translation task.

Also, translation has been recognized as one of the cognitive learning strategies (Chamot & Kupper, 1989; Oxford, 1990). This is to say that learners are able to process, receive, and transfer L2 based on their L1. Husain (1995) reports that foreign language learners are able to comprehend and analyze the complicated structure of the second language rapidly and efficiently by means of translation. In several studies, translation is used as an affective, social, memory, and compensation strategy in order for assisting learners to learn foreign languages effectively through different ways. For instance, Karimian and Talebinejad (2013) studied Iranian students' use of translation as a learning strategy and said that translation was a supportive and effective factor for learning English.

To consider translation as a memory strategy, Liao (2006) and Chern (1993) have claimed that EFL college students of Taiwan usually write Urdu translation in the margins of their textbooks as an assistance to remember the meanings of English words and phrases. As effective strategy, translation can decrease foreign or second language learners' anxiety. Wenden (1987) in his study found that interviewing adult learners while speaking English made them anxious; when they were told to plan what they were supposed to say in their first language and give their thoughts via translation, the learners felt calm. They said that planning their thought in the first language and expressing it in the target language via translation could relieve their conflicting emotions.

Calis and Dikilitas (2012) have reported that translation enables students to compare and contrast first and second language playing a positive role in social and compensation strategies. Students feel more approval in learning process when they can find the equivalent of the target structure in their mother tongue and use them in communication.

They tend to include translation in target language learning without anxiety and manage their independent study skills as well as develop their interpersonal abilities. Students not only reveal that translation inclusion allows them to interact with their peers, but also it provides them an insight into the effectiveness of translation in communicative language learning and teaching context.

### 2.4 Translation as a Technique

Translation may be a useful learning technique through which learners are able to acquire vocabulary, grasp grammar, and eventually comprehend a text.

El-Shafie (1992) studied the efficacy of some techniques to teach translation at schools of education. On the other hand, Zohrevandi (1992) defined a communicative activity integrated with translation. In that activity, students were divided into groups, and each group was assigned words and phrases in their first language. Following that, the students had to complete a short English dialogue by using the given words and phrases in their first language. Each group role played their dialogue, and the one that acted the best received a bonus. Also, teachers asked the students to analyze their dialogue in terms of syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. Meanwhile, Zohrevandi recommended other communicative activities consisting of having students act out movies in English or translate movies into English. Activities associated with translation made students to use translation as well.

Levenston (1985) views translation as an efficient teaching and evaluation technique in communicative language teaching and proposes that teachers use interpretation in role-play activities; for example, a student is a foreign visitor who goes to a department store and faces a communication breakdown with a salesperson there. At that time, another student plays the role of an interpreter to give assistance; in such an authentic situation translation presents a communicative goal.

### 2.5 Related past studies

A few studies investigated learners' perceptions of using translation in their foreign language learning. For instance, Horwitz (1988) found translation prevailing in Taiwanese students' learning of English. In such settings, teachers ought to be aware of the use of translation as a strategy by learners and they might not inhibit students from integrating translation to their learning. Translation should be adapted to the aim of language teaching in its appropriate context and be presented in a way to highlight similarities and differences between first and second language forms.

Recently, the outlook on employing translation and L1 in language learning has been taken positively; teachers and students have realized translation as a supportive and potential strategy to take advantage of. Some scholars assume that avoiding translation in language settings may make a lot of students stressed.

Liao (2006) carried out both qualitative and quantitative surveys on 351 Taiwanese students' perception about translation. As he reported, students asserted that translation could help them acquire English language skills like vocabulary and phrases, speaking, reading, writing, as well as idioms. The genuine effectiveness of translation in foreign language classrooms associates to comparing vocabulary, grammar, word order and other language points in foreign language and student's L1. Translation must indirectly be applied in teaching, particularly in advanced levels.

### **3. Method**

#### *3.1 Subjects*

The subjects of this study included EFL teachers and learners in both genders with different educational backgrounds. They were selected from English Language Institutes and Universities of the city of Shiraz, Iran. A total of 44 graduate and undergraduate EFL teachers along with 56 learners studying in different fields - mostly English - participated in this study. Learners whose proficiency level was estimated to be intermediate and advanced and teachers who were teaching EFL at different levels, particularly advanced, were asked to fill in the questionnaires and following that all of them were interviewed.

#### *3.2 Instrumentation*

A combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches was used in this study. It seems that combining and increasing the number of research strategies used within a particular project may expand the scope of investigation and develop researchers' ability to reach conclusions about the problem under study. Hence, two questionnaires and an interview guide developed by Posen Liao (2006) were selected as instruments to collect data from both teachers and learners. It is required to mention that researchers made some changes in the structure of questionnaires. The questionnaire called "inventory for beliefs about translation" was administered to measure teachers and learners' perceptions and the other one called "inventory for translation as a learning strategy" was applied to measure translation as method, strategy or technique. Both questionnaires were formulated based on Likert Scale ranging from "strongly agree" (score 5) to "strongly disagree" (score 1). The reliability of questionnaires determined through Cronbach alpha were 0.78 and 0.83.

Later, focus group interviews were conducted with 35 teachers. Each interview lasted for around 15 minutes. Qualitative method was administered with the purpose of eliciting information about male and female teachers' perspectives on using translation in their own teaching contexts. During the interviews, the following questions were asked:

1. Why can translation be used as the medium of instruction?
2. Have you been asked not to use translation to teach a foreign language and to think straight in that language when you are teaching? If so, how do you find this advice?
3. Learners usually utilize translation to assist them in learning foreign language; how do they personally do that?
4. What are the effects of employing translation in teaching a foreign language?
5. What proficiency level can mostly take advantage of using translation? Why?
6. What language skills can be mastered the most via translation? Why?
7. Some educators claim that language teachers can break their habit of using translation gradually as their teaching goes on. What do you think of the ways we can change this habit?
8. Is there anything you would like to mention from your experience or your beliefs while teaching a foreign language through translation?

#### *3.3 Data analysis*

First, descriptive analysis was run. Independent t-test was administered to specify the probable differences between teachers and learners' responses as well as their attitudes towards utilizing translation as method, strategy or technique. The data obtained from the questionnaires were subjected to SPSS (Version 22) and through the percentages employing translation in Iran education system was determined. Then, the responses provided through interview questions were studied to see how teachers supplied the data.

### **4. Results and Discussion**

The following section presents the findings emerged from the questionnaires and interview guide. Answering the first one "What are teachers and learners' perceptions of using translation in learning foreign languages as a method, strategy, or technique?" independent t-test assessed whether the means of both groups, teachers and learners, were statistically different from each other. As it can be seen in Table 1, there is no significant difference between teachers and learners' perceptions.

Table 1. Independent samples t-test results comparing teachers and learners' perceptions

Group	N	Mean	SD	t	df	sig
Learners	56	106.71	13.67	1.32	98	.19
Teacher	44	102.93	14.59			

The second question concerned the difference between teachers and learners' attitude to employing translation in teaching/learning a foreign language. Based on the results in Table 2, no significant difference can be found between teachers and learners approach toward using translation in Iranian foreign language context.

Table 2. Independent samples t-test results comparing teachers and learners' attitudes

Group	N	Mean	SD	t	df	sig
Learners	56	89.29	14.50	1.07	98	.27
Teacher	44	92.95	18.68			

To answer the third question "What are the merits, demerits and limitations of applying translation in teaching foreign languages?" the interview guide was used and the following results were obtained.

Based on the findings obtained from the interview, we draw conclusion that using translation as a teaching method, strategy or technique can be beneficial or detrimental. Translation automatically occurs in the language use and some teachers acknowledge it inevitable in the process of L2 learning. A number of teachers assert that translation can help students learn and comprehend sooner and better, especially when they fail to grasp the meaning of difficult points. They claim that it is useful in teaching grammar and vocabulary regardless of the learners' proficiency level as it can clarify meaning. Students need to know the differences and similarities between their mother tongue and target language, i.e. while a teacher is explaining grammatical structures and rules, students will think about corresponding structures in their L1 and compare both languages structures to understand better. In this regard, Posen Liao (2006) in his study found that translation can help students to comprehend English, check if their comprehension is accurate, facilitate the memorization of words, grammar, sentence structures and idioms as well as relieving students' anxiety.

No matter how learners' proficiency level is, using translation in teaching grammar is efficient. Understating some difficult vocabularies without translating them to Persian is impossible. Sometimes, teachers make a lot of effort to explain some words without referring to students' mother tongue but eventually they have to translate them to Persian, particularly in cultural contexts. However, it should be extremely limited and only used as a last resort, particularly in teaching vocabulary; when the teacher cannot explain anymore. Teachers believe that using constant translation will make students dependent everywhere.

A further advantage of translation is students indirectly involve in the teaching process themselves, just as the teacher attends to check their comprehension and ask them to find a similar situation in their own language; let them create the same situation on their own in the target language. As a result, it has a good effect on the remembrance of the structure in the right context. They thus fail to grasping and guessing the structure.

As one of the teachers stated she only used translation as a medium to check her students' comprehension in the class, i.e. she asked them to translate what they had learnt in their own mother tongue to see if they got the point. In this respect, teacher can be assured if learning is occurred or not.

Mutlu, Bayram and Demirbüken (2015) reported that most teachers tend to reject the inclusion of native language into foreign language classrooms, but learners still rely on translation to improve their language learning. Teachers hence should not deny the role of translation in learning vocabulary items and sentence structure, particularly for elementary students.

A few teachers asserted that old learners find thinking in English impossible. Hence, they can ask students to produce a pattern of language in English, then create a specific situation related to a specific structure and ask them "How do you say it in your mother tongue?" After guessing the right context, they will teach the appropriate form in English. Teachers were inclined to believe that finding similarities between foreign language and the mother tongue can hasten the process of learning.

Several teachers reported that they could not apply translation as a pedagogical tool at all since they supposed using L1 constantly in the classroom would form a habit.

The findings of Bagheri and Fazel (2011) study may provide teachers an effective insight into the role of translation learning process. They believed that teachers should not ban students' use of translation and suggest it to some learners according to their learning strategies and cognitive styles. In this vein, teachers must raise learners' awareness about the probable drawbacks of first language interference and then word-for-word translation.

Needless to say, language teachers can break this habit gradually as their teaching goes on; they can achieve this goal by increasing their ability and knowledge in teaching specific patterns of language use. For example, they can consult their colleagues, or participate in teachers' training courses. They should know different methods of teaching a foreign language and should not rely upon a fixed method as the sole method of teaching. To put it another way, they should know that translation can be one of the methods, not the only one.

About 80 percent of the teachers believed that translation inclusion in the foreign language setting will cause students' mother tongue to interfere in their learning. For instance, if students permanently think in Persian for all time and translate everything, they cannot master sentences, phrases, expressions, and idioms in a foreign language. Teachers maintained that using first language was a time-consuming task and learners may take a chance to ask their questions in Persian and they cannot capture the exact meaning via translation.

Atkinson (1987) stipulated that if teachers or students employ translation constantly, they may feel they can merely comprehend the language by means of translation; although learners may be able to express what they mean in English they prefer to speak in their mother tongue; learners fail to distinguish equivalence of form, and pragmatic features.

Alternatively, most teachers in the current study were of the belief that institutes and supervisors mostly pressure teachers to take advantage of English as a means of instruction in different levels due to some reasons. They claimed that a part of these reasons may be scientific and the other part may be based on personal views. For example, some institutes force their teachers to speak English all the time as a sign of prestige or a form of advertisement to attract more students. Several experienced teachers contended that teachers can substitute other techniques for translation; they said the more we think in English, the better we learn.

### 5. Conclusion and Implications of the Study

It must be taken into consideration that the function of translation as teaching method, strategy, or technique mostly count on the proficiency of learners and the amount of translation included in the classroom practice. We are not advocating that translation should never be used when teaching a foreign language. Generally speaking, foreign language teachers, regardless of the levels taken in their teaching, overtly or covertly integrate translation to their teaching activity. This may be done to contribute students' better comprehension or to help teachers overcome a time-consuming activity in the class and make it easier to cover. On the one hand, some teachers deem translation appropriate as a time saving medium which can reduce students' anxiety and endorse their understanding.

Translation can be a positive and facilitative learning strategy based on extensive research studies. It might fulfill multiple functions in foreign language learning; it can be used as an affective, cognitive, social, memory, and compensation strategy to facilitate learners' development of vocabulary, reading, and writing.

In summary, translation can and will be a useful technique in class in the following ways:

1. It is useful to remove the psychological barriers learners may take to the learning environment;
2. It is helpful when teaching some complex grammatical structures unless the learners are proficient enough to cope with the L2 explanations;
3. It is a technique at hand in vocabulary practice when all the other practical techniques fail, for example for memorizing difficult words; and
4. In a reading activity and when comprehension comes to a standstill (cultural-bound items) teachers are allowed to apply translation.

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