

L1 Translation use in Language Classroom: the Scope and Specific Situation

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Abstract

Generally, the field of teaching languages has been, at least up to the last few decades, the locus of debate in favor of either of two extremes of *Naturalism*¹ and *Traditionalism*. This trend has led to periods in which one inclination has been favored over the other. Few pedagogic agendas really embraced the fact that the Natural view (depicting second/ foreign language learned the same way as mother tongue acquisition) and the Traditional view (depicting language learning and teaching the same as learning and teaching other disciplines) both were profitable to some *specific extent* and in *specific situations*. Nowadays, however, in the outset of the second decade of the 21st century, L1 use is finding its *rightful* way back to the language teaching profession. The introduction of approaches as the Comprehensible Input by Krashen (1981) and Long (1983), although not having any Natural tendency in their own right, paved the way for reconsidering the role L1 can play in the process of language learning. There is a relatively new method (or better said, *approach*) which uses L1 in teaching a foreign language. That is the New Concurrent Method, which requires teachers to balance the use of the L1 and the L2, which is an offspring of such reconsideration (Faltis, 1990). In this approach, the L1 is used as a Facilitating, Time-saving, and Reassuring tool. However, language teaching profession in general is affected by the culture where it occurs; this is to say that, language teaching shows different inclinations and idiosyncrasies which are the function of that culture and the tenets of the profession which have gained general acceptance and those which have not therein. In this study we took a closer look at this issue and got some insights regarding the effectiveness of L1 use as *pedagogic translation*, best functional when there is a balance between the comprehensibility garnered through translation and the teacher (L2) talk, as a source of input to the students.

Keywords: Pedagogic translation, L1, language learning, specific extent, specific situation

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¹ Showing second language learning as a natural process, as is with L1 acquisition.

As mentioned above, different cultures usually favor different aspects in language teaching. For example, the Iranian students and English schools happen to believe that a teacher, who *never* uses the L1, is a best teacher, and so do the English schools. Even the usual state-run schools, in which English is taught, still lag behind the tide of incidences in the profession, pursuing some amalgamation of GT Method and the popular and mostly ill-understood principles of the DM, which pushes them to either of the extremes mentioned.

We could define translation in this study as *pedagogic* translation, considering that its purpose is to teach a language, i.e. a tool. As mentioned, the L1 is used as a Facilitating, Time-saving, and Reassuring tool in the New Concurrent Method. But the researcher's aim in this study is not to investigate the premises of this teaching method. In this study, we will discuss and try to find the applications and effects of using L1 in teaching English as a foreign language, investigating its *facilitating, time-saving, and reassuring* functions. Therefore, it will incorporate L1 (Persian) into the EFL teaching in ways to facilitate (understanding and teaching grammar), save time and boost transparency (in teaching and understanding grammar) and to reassure students of the instructions given by the teacher and the key vocabulary to be presented, if they are so abstract that other ways as *using pictures or exemplification or definition* are impossible or time-consuming. To put this into perspective, we should have at least three groups of students with the same specifications, such as their syllabus, their competence level, gender, age range, ... and then start teaching one class with the present approach to TEFL which makes any effort to avoid using L1, and the other classes with the approach followed in this study, which supports giving instructions, commands, subjective concepts and classroom planning procedure using L1, but still keeps the main task of teaching based on the L2 itself. Therefore, two main questions to be addressed in this research are:

1. Whether using L1 and translating classroom aspects mentioned above benefit students' learning, and
2. To what extent and when this tool is best functional.

Statement of the problem

Duff warns that language competence is a two-way system that we need to be able to communicate into and from this system. Yet little guidance is given on how to communicate back into the mother tongue, something that many professionals need to do in their daily work (Duff 1989:6). There are of course similarities between L1 and L2 learning, especially in terms of input and learning stages. However, there is probably almost as much difference between the two processes. This difference gets more critical when it comes to foreign language learning settings, as in Iran, where the second language has no role in the learners' everyday lives. The people who learn a language in an EFL setting do possess a prior experience which could probably be tapped into in some productive ways. It is customary in most of Iranian language

schools that teachers must avoid using the students' first language, Persian. Persian and English share many features in many respects. For example, taking into consideration the delicate differences of, say, Present Perfect tense in the two languages, the fact that there is such a conception in common between the two languages is a benefit to both the teacher and learners. But not always is there such an overlap. Take the English Present Perfect Continuous tense, which has no counterpart in Standard Persian, but there is a way of expressing such a conception in the Vernacular version of Persian. Such being the case, the teacher will have a long time getting the students to know what the structure he presents is all about. Therefore, as many scholars like Ellis (2002) have pointed out, a focus on form and the *informed use of translation and L1* could work to the benefit of the learners and teachers.

Here there comes up the question that what kind of translation is best and how often it must be used and in which situation. This question puts forward three basic issues, namely:

- The kind of translation (Literal and/ or conceptual (relational) translation),
- The frequency of use,
- And the situation.

The researcher's prior experience tends him toward this proposition that, taking into account the similarities and differences between the two languages, the kind of translation and L1 use that best suites learners is firstly a Literal Translation and immediately after, a Conceptual rephrasing or Relational Translation (*Communicative Translation*). The odds are that if a structure that proves difficult to the learner is firstly translated word-by-word, and then replaced by a relational or *Communicative Translation* version of it, the learner would gain an insight into the structure that would be so abstract and time-consuming to teach otherwise, especially when the target structure is under-represented in the L1. Therefore, when there is such a case of under-representation, such translations seem to be a best choice.

Review of the Related Literature

Translation in language teaching

Translation and L1 use, from the beginning of the twentieth century and before that, and up to the 1960s and 1970s, have been an unalienable part and a concomitant of language teaching, and this is best embodied in the Grammar Translation Method. But this mentality did not withstand the emergent flow of studies in the domains of cognitive psychology and later social studies which added a momentum to the issue of language teaching. However, when such new naturalist methods as the Direct Method or ALM² failed to attract public interest, there was a shift back to a somehow *modified* version of the Grammar Translation Method, the Reading Approach.

² Audio-lingual Method

In response to new views about learning, and the rising need for learners to speak, the Natural Method movement towards the end of the 19th Century “challenged the value of translation and the efficiency of formal grammar study” (Bowen, Madsen, & Hilferty, 1985, p. 20; see also Salmani Nodoushan, 2003, 2006a; Salmani Nodoushan & Daftarifard 2011). The Direct Method, which advocated teaching L2 through L2, became popular with the increase of modern foreign language teaching. As well, it favored “input before output” and so placed listening prior to speaking, emphasizing an oral approach in the early stage of L2 learning.

By mid-20th Century, the Audio-lingual Method (ALM) had swept into second language teaching profession. It was a shift of emphasis from written to spoken language. Very shortly, AL Method’s approach to learning, which was based on behaviorism and analysis of the surface structure of the language, was under challenge from the cognitive, generative approach of Chomsky (e.g. 1959, 1965). Chomsky argued that children cannot learn a language simply from exposure to language input naturally available around them. In order to generate and create words and sentences, he proposed, they must be born with an innate language acquisition device (LAD). This theory has influenced the field of second language acquisition ever since. Krashen, for example, extended Chomsky's view and in his Affective Filter Hypothesis and Input Hypothesis, incorporated the notion of a LAD (1985, pp. 3–4).

The post-war period witnessed development of a number of approaches based on or diverging from Chomsky's theories. One of the most significant and enduring was the Communicative Approach, which placed emphasis on meaningful input in L2 (exposure to L2 in realistic situations) and a naturalistic approach (like children’s L1 learning). As a result, teaching explicit linguistic forms and using the mother tongue were still avoided, although Curran's (1976) Community Language Learning did make use of L1. From its inception, the Communicative Approach also received criticism, notably for example, Swain (1985), who claimed exposure to meaningful input alone (i.e. natural language leaning) cannot develop the competence essential for learners to communicate successfully.

Another approach from that time was the Notional/Functional Syllabus, which organized the language to be taught under notional and functional categories and emphasized language as a tool of communication. In place of the word to word or linguistic equivalents of other approaches, it promoted teaching a new language through presenting *functional equations* between the first and second language usage. Today, the input is described to best serve comprehension when it is modified in a way that fits their competence level (in terms of speed) or an input which incorporates a chance for the learner to ask for exemplification (Ellis, Tanaka, and Yamazaki, 1994; Maleki, 2013; Salmani Nodoushan, 2006b,c, 2007a,b,c,d,e,f, 2008a,b,c,d,e, 2009a,b,c,d, 2010, 2011, 2012).

More recent trends

In recent years, the necessity for *integration of explicit instruction into communicative approaches* has become obvious. Ellis (1996) suggested that grammar teaching can enhance learner proficiency and accuracy and assist learners to acquire the syntactic system of the language. Brown (1994) and Larsen-Freeman (1991) discuss the need for grammar teaching along with communicative tasks. Doughty & Williams (1998) propose that ‘focus on form’ instruction should be integrated in language teaching. This involves negotiating meaning in certain linguistic and non-linguistic contexts (FonF³ instruction), including a rather overt focus on some grammatical/ linguistic units (e.g. gender distinction: Harley, 1998). At the same time as these analytic developments, language use is being seen as more of a *holistic activity*. In this view, language is not only understood as a communication instrument, but also as a reflection of the context in which it is used, such as the speakers’ L1 culture, and the sociolinguistic features of the situation (e.g. Niemeir, 2004). Constructivism sees that individual learners construct knowledge for themselves, using their prior experience and the range of contextual elements they perceive. Such learning is also seen as a personal process (Allen, 2004).

A Constructivist approach to learning emphasizes providing authentic, challenging projects for the learners. Projects which are meaningful to the learners, i.e. ones in which they can incorporate their experience outside of the classroom, set in problem solving contexts, involving peers and teacher (expert) in the learning community, appear to promote effective learning. Through interaction and negotiation in the learning community, learners construct knowledge, while the problem-solving nature of the projects demands use of higher cognitive processes (Newell & Simon, 1972), such as reflecting on the problem and/ or on their own learning, and searching for solutions (e.g. Cunningham, Duffy, & Knuth, 1993).

The re-consideration of L1 use in L2 instruction has been a dramatic change in recent years. In a turnaround from Direct Method, ALM and Natural Approaches, it is now seen as potentially beneficial rather than erroneous. According to our current understanding of vocabulary storage in the brain (e.g. the connectionist model of Macaro, 2003), bilinguals access one common storage system containing both L1 and L2 vocabulary. L1 is thus considered to assist learners’ comprehension of L2 by creating more networks between nodes (ideational representation and words) in their long term memory.

The Affective Filter

Krashen, in his Affective Filter Hypothesis and Input Hypothesis (1985, pp. 3–4), proposes that the learning process will occur when the learner’s affective filter is low, and therefore he feels no or little anxiety and hindrance to absorbing the input. This is especially the case with adult learners, who have already built up a personality and more often feel sensitive to situations which may *humiliate them or make others laugh at him*. One way of lowering this filter and

³ Focus on Form

relieving the student of what she/ he is expected to do in the class could be using L1 in instructions when they seem to have no idea of what the teacher is asking them to do.

Research questions

1. Does Pedagogic Translation of both kinds benefit the students' total achievement to a significant level measured by their term exam?
2. Does the situation in which translation is used, i.e. either as a last resort, or freely in teacher instructions and grammar explanations and word' meaning explanations, have a significant effect on their achievement?

As it can be seen, the first question has led to the latter question, and the answer to this first question will be axiomatic if the following question turns out to be right.

Research hypotheses

NH 1: The use of Pedagogic Translation has no significant effect on the total achievement of students.

NH 2: The situation in which this translation is made use of has no significant effect on the total achievement of students.

Method

In this study, we have two independent variables, namely, *the pedagogic translation* and *the situation in which it is used*. We will try to measure the possible effect of these variables on two independent variables, the total achievement of the students, and the degree of safety they experience during the class sessions.

To set up the required framework, we need three groups of learners; a first group in which the pedagogic translation is made use of freely whenever it is needed, avoiding any time-consuming circumlocutions by mouthing the point in their own language, and to reassure them and get the class going and save time for more communicative activities; a second group receiving such an *enabling aid* just when the new word exemplifications seem to fail, grammar contextualization and form-focused instruction would not make a breakthrough, and when the class instructions may not be so simple as to get understood, and finally a third group which will be taught as the common sense indicates, i.e. avoiding any use of L1. The first two groups' final performance will be measured against the third group's performance. The criteria regarding *when* such a

translation is or is not needed is based on the teacher-researcher's conception of the situation and by the reaction of students, and their following or not following the paths laid before them by the teacher.

Participants

The participants are thirty learners in three groups, each group with ten learners at Level 6 (pre-intermediate). All the participants are female learners, within an age range of 12-27. They take English classes at this private-run English institute, *Iran Language Center*, Mashhad, Iran.

Procedure

The three groups of learners (the sample) should be homogeneous in almost all respects that would otherwise prejudice our final results. Our sample is randomly selected; however, due to administration issues, there is not the possibility to separate the sample from the total population. This way, the classes' organization remains intact. All the students (the population) received a pre-test, which is their previous term's final exam that incorporates written and listening parts from their textbook *Top Notch English book series'* achievement test. In other words, the researcher does not meddle with the classes' organization, and the sample which is selected according to their performance on the pre-test mentioned will remain in their classes without knowing that they are samples of our study; and it is necessary here to mention that their identity is not represented in any way herein. Based on this pre-test, the standard deviation (SD) of the classes' performance will be a criterion for selecting the sample. Accordingly, those whose scores on the pre-test fall more than one SD beyond or below the mean of the population will be crossed out of the study, and their data will not be taken into further consideration. To keep other constructs constant to the highest extent possible, the population and hence the samples are all female pre-intermediate (Level 6 locally) learners. Based on these propositions, the following sample got available for this study:

There were three classes available who were going to begin their 6th level with totally 46 students, at the *Iran Language Center*, a private-run English school in Mashhad. At the beginning of the term, it would seem a good idea to refer to their previous term's (Level 6) scores on their final exam; however, this was not desired, or possible, since we needed a one-for-all exam to be administered at the same time, and further, there are two versions of a final test for almost each level. Therefore, considering their previous scores on that test could be biased in some ways. The most practical way would be to randomly select items from the two versions of the test to make a single exam with 40 items, corresponding to the original ones. Five items out of the total forty items are dedicated to listening comprehension questions.

After the exam was administered, the following data were yielded:

Table 1: The descriptive statistics of the population on the pre-test

Class	Number of Students	$\sum x^2$	Class Mean	Class SD	Total Mean	Total SD
Class A	14	16306	33.5	6.37	33.83	4.92
Class B	15	15684	32	4.81		
Class C	17	19062	36	3.68		
Total	46	51052	100.5			

As indicated in table 1, the standard deviation of the test scores for the total number of students (the population) equaled 4.92, and the total mean equaled 33.83. Therefore, any score ≤ 38.75 or ≥ 28.91 would not be taken into account for further processes. The least number of scores within the desired distance from the total mean was in class A, with 10 scores within the desired range. And, in classes B and C, the number of scores within this range was 11 and 14 respectively. Hence, ten of the scores closest to the mean from classes B and C were selected to have three samples of ten, each group in each class. Class A would be taught with a *free use of translation* view whenever needed; class B would be taught with a *translation as a last resort* view; and class C was taught with an *avoiding L1 use* view. The organization of the three sample groups is as follows:

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of the sample groups

Sample	Scores	Mean	Approach
Class A	37, 35, 29, 36, 29, 37, 38, 36, 38, 29	34.4	<i>Free use if needed</i>
Class B	37, 32, 30, 37, 37, 34, 33, 33, 30, 33	33.6	<i>As a last resort</i>
Class C	29, 33, 31, 31, 34, 35, 36, 33, 32, 31	32.5	<i>Conventional; No L1</i>

The mean of the mean scores of these three groups equals 33.5, which is close to the population mean, 33.83, as shown in table 1 above. This indicates that the sample well represents our population.

After this preliminary step, two of the three sample groups embedded in their classes (classes A and B) will be taught according to the described theme of the study, namely, the possible profitability of L1 use as translation, i.e. using L1 translation either *freely*, or *whenever no other tool seems to work out*. This minimal use of translation (i.e. not for the sake of translation itself) includes the instructions given to students for doing class task and activities, vocabulary which are so subjective, and the grammatical structures which may not be easily communicated otherwise (either a literal translation or a communicative translation for cases of overlap⁴ and under-representations⁵), and expressions and word collocations whose literal translation sounds sensible. The following is an example of such a literal translation that aids learning and/ or remembering its meaning, since the semantic values and relations of the words collocated resemble similar semantic domains in Persian:

He is all thumbs. [Explained in Persian that a person whose fingers are all the form of a thumb will lack enough functionality, and that person would have difficulty touching and carrying things].

The English Present perfect, which has a counterpart in Persian (with an identical title if translated word for word), whose general meaning communicated is highly overlapped with that of Persian; except for a shade of meaning difference being that the Persian Present Perfect tense verb does not necessarily mean that the action or situation indicated is continuing at the moment it is being talked about, but rather indicating that it was continued at least up to the time being. However, in English a sentence like *I've been living here for seven years* normally entails that the person is still living there.

And, the third sample group (within class C) will be taught in a way common in the local institutes and common sense, i.e. avoiding L1 use in any way to the farthest degree possible.

Results

After the final exams were administered, the researcher acquired a list of scores, with the students' names removed and numbers used instead. We mentioned before that there are two versions of the same exam used to limit the memory effect for those who fail and should repeat

⁴ The term Overlap is usually used to describe cases in which a certain syntactic structure is present in two or more given languages (and maybe with minimal fluctuations in their functions).

⁵ The term Under-representation indicates cases in which a certain syntactic structure in an L1 does not have any syntactic equivalent in an L2.

that level and to limit any chance of leaking out of the questions. To these three classes, i.e. our population, the same exam was assigned, and the exam sessions were organized in a row, one after the other, and on the same day.

Now we turn to our sample groups to see any significant change in their scores as compared to the third group, i.e. the one having been taught with a *no L1 use* approach. The significance level for the *t* value is put to .05, as is usual in social sciences research. Table 3 displays the inferential data regarding the sample's performance on the final exam.

Table 3: Inferential statistics of the sample groups

Calculation	SEM⁶	<i>t_{observed}</i>	<i>t_{critical}</i>	Degree of Freedom	Null Hypothesis
A vs. C	1.15	2.69	2.10	18	Rejected
B vs. C	1.009	2.87	2.10	18	Rejected

Discussion

The researcher, based on experience, and based on prior studies concerning the classroom input (Maleki, 2013), predicted that group B, i.e. that taught with a *translation as a last resort*, might outperform the other two groups. In this approach there seems to be a trade off between comprehensibility garnered via L1 use and enough (L2) input in teacher talk. Let us mention here that it is a reality, although many might disfavor, that when you remove the extra task of understanding classroom language delivered by the teacher for classroom organization, which may be too much to take by the learners, at least by some of them, they will know what exactly they are required to do, when, and how. This is also a reality that students do benefit from their teacher's talk, so one might be unwilling to do away with all the common beliefs about how to handle teacher talk; but caution must be practiced not to indulge in the use of L1. Maybe a more significant result of this study is the mere fact that L1 use in the form of restating or translating class language and explanations does really work out, and has a legitimate role to play in adult second/ foreign language learning. If L1 use in private and state language institutes is disfavored at the price of removing the ease and efficiency of learning, it by no means is to say that the approach taken in junior high schools and high schools nationwide in which language is taught as a *subject matter* through L1 is a favorite one. Even in these state schools one can find teachers

⁶ Standard Error of Measurement

favoring a *no-L1 use approach*. Still, a more cautious approach could be the one used in group B, as proven by the statistics, in which L1 translation is *one* of the classroom tools tapped into to keep the momentum of a dynamic class environment. The fact that we usually observe learners seek permission from their teacher whether they may talk over an issue in their L1 or not, shades some light on this proposition.

Still, the fact that sample group A has outperformed the conventional (*control group in a sense*) group C, does not seem to be arbitrary, especially when we take their total mean on the first pre-test, which was lower than that of B group. One might argue that the higher mean of group B on the pre-test may indicate they are in a way more gifted than the other groups; however, group A's total mean on the pre-test, which is lower than group B's, and still favors the use of L1, stands evidence again to the legitimacy of informed L1 use. It remains to the teacher to decide when, how much, and where to make use of it. It seems that a literal translation (which reveals the internal underpinnings of the L2 structure) followed by a relational restatement (re-telling that in line with L1 oriented organization) best serve the purpose that L1 translation has.

Limitations of the study

Every study done to yield specific results and answer specified questions must follow the scientific method of research. But not all studies, especially in the domain of Humanities, could be of this *perfect* nature, since there are almost always variables (or better said, Constructs) that cannot be controlled or fully taken into consideration. The fact that the sample cannot be randomly assigned to each study group has to do with such a limitation. The other issue is the number of sample participants. For the three groups we ended up with 30 students, which would reduce the generalizability of the results. But, it will at least pave the way for other upcoming researches which will delve into this issue, and possibly demerit the current common sense beliefs that exists in local schools and institutes.

Conclusion

The present study was initiated firstly from intuitions about the status that a second language learner's native language may have, if any. We can conclude herein that, taking into account the limitations this study suffers, a planned and informed use of learners' L1 has benefits. These benefits have to do with issues like comprehensibility, class management, and saving the time.

The figures show us that such an approach does play a positive role in language teaching, as far as the general achievement is considered. This profitability must not drive us to an extreme though. The use of such an approach may take experience, a fair command of the two languages (especially in terms of syntax), and situation consciousness; which means the teacher is the one

who decides if, when, where, and for whom this tool may be used. If your students are more brilliant in a given class, you may not bother to initiate using their L1, as far as you know they are on track of your plan.

One final remark would be stressing the fact that the use of L1 everywhere mentioned herein, means a compensatory, temporary, and auxiliary device to be among the repertoire of a teacher's techniques. This is evident in group B's performance on their final summative exam.

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