

The Role of First Language and Translation in EFL Learning: A Brief Literature Review

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ARTICLE INFO

Received: February 05, 2019
Accepted: February 28, 2019
Published: March 31, 2019
Volume: 2
Issue: 2
DOI: 10.32996/ijllt.2019.2.2.24

KEYWORDS

first language, mother tongue, translation, EFL learning, EFL classrooms

ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of first language (L1) and translation in EFL learning, paying attention to research findings on the issue. This article reviews literature with a focus on L1 and translation in EFL learning as a tool to help learners improve their English skills and master other English linguistic aspects. The author highlights various works that discuss the importance and roles of L1 and translation in EFL learning. Both L1 and translation are believed and proved to be still in existence and in use in EFL learning in many parts of the world, where English is still a foreign language, today.

INTRODUCTION

The role of first language and translation in language learning, in EFL learning particularly, have received considerable attention. First language (L1), which is also known as mother tongue or native tongue, refers to “language one thinks in, dreams in and counts in” (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1981 in Ellis, 2007, p. 5), more specifically, it is a “language which a person acquires in early years and which normally becomes its (sic) natural instrument of thought and communication (UNESCO, 1953 in Ellis, 2007, p. 5), while the term translation refers to “the reception and/or production and/or reworking of spoken or written bi-texts (pair discourses in two languages) within the classroom situation” (Pym & Rovira, 2013, p. 7).

In recent years, there have been many papers describing the role of first language and translation in foreign language learning although since the late nineteenth century it has been emphasized that a second/foreign language is best taught through monolingual approach without use of students’ first language and translation during the teaching and learning process (Hall & Cook, 2012) which means that it should be done through communicative approach that requires foreign language learners to think in the language they learn directly. However, L1 has continued to be used in language instructions in many parts of the world (Benson, 2000; Cook, 2008 in Hall & Cook, 2012) and translation in language teaching is also still widely used in practice around the world (Cook, 2009; Lems, Miller, & Solo, 2010; Schjoldager, 2004 in Kelly & Bruen, 2014).

This article reviews literature with a focus on the role of first language and translation in EFL learning.

The role of first language in EFL learning

L1 is believed to play an important role in EFL learning. Seftiawan (2018) states that L1 can help 6-year learners to study EFL and master vocabularies through translation. L1 also serves to function as a powerful tool for EFL learning and teaching if pedagogical activities are well prepared because L1 helps students to comprehend L2 knowledge and decrease students’ insecurities due to their limited L1 proficiency (Pan & Pan, 2010). Furthermore, L1 can also be used to explain a certain vocabulary, grammar, instructions, organization purposes, and to check students’ understanding (Hanakova & Metruk, 2017). They further state that L1 is always present in the classroom and cannot be avoided, therefore, a set of clear rules on the use of L1 should be made for the EFL teaching and learning process. Galali & Cinkara (2017) state that learners’ L1 plays a facilitating role in order for them to acquire foreign language knowledge under certain conditions. The use of L1 is tolerable among beginners and its use should be then limited as their proficiency becomes more advanced because, as stated by Gomathi & Kiruthika (2013), it is an effective resource if it is utilized in an appropriate way.

The role of L1 has great importance in second/foreign language teaching because they are

inseparable from each other although both teachers and students are aware of the use of the language being learnt as much as possible in the classroom, however, they still cannot avoid the importance and role of L1 (Paker & Karaağaç, 2015). L1 can be used to define the meaning of a new word, explain grammatical rules, clarify different concepts between L1 and the target language, and check students' comprehension. Thus, if it is wisely used in EFL classroom by both teachers and students, it can be a useful tool for teaching and learning process (Jan, Li, & Lin, 2014).

Alshehri (2017) argues that teachers use L1 in EFL classroom for some functions, for example explaining new vocabularies to students and developing good rapport with students. From students' point of view, it is mainly used for translating new vocabularies and preparing tasks. Furthermore, Butzkamm (2003, p. 29) emphasizes that "using mother tongue we have (1) learnt to think, (2) learnt to communicate, and (3) acquired an intuitive understanding of grammar." Therefore, L1 is the best asset people have for learning a foreign language and provides a "Language Acquisition Support System" (Butzkamm, 2003, p. 29). L1 is also said as a mediation process in language teaching and learning because both teachers and students are not against the use of L1. They further state that L1 should be used in emergency situations where necessary (Mahmutoglu & Kicir, 2013) because L1 can also be used as a facilitator in the classrooms and students always use it to help them learn English (Rommel & Tonelli, 2017).

The role of translation in EFL learning

The role of translation in EFL learning has also been studied extensively in recent years. Translation based textbooks are highly required in EFL learning and translation is suggested to be used for teaching EFL, not for professional career in translation, and translation based teaching model should be applied in English education study program (Siregar, Sinar, Saragih, & Lubis, 2018). The suggestion was based on a quantitative study they conducted to 100 prospective EFL teachers and 92% of them agree that translation-based textbooks are significantly needed. I could say that this finding is surprising. A classroom-based research was also conducted to 28 elementary students by (Calis & Dikilitas, 2012). They found that the students use translation in their EFL learning in the classroom to help them comprehend reading and understand EFL vocabularies. They finally conclude that translation tasks can be used to promote students' productive and receptive skills. Stibbard (1994) states that it is no big deal for using translation at all levels of foreign language learners, with children and with adults, as long as it is used properly following the principles of translation theory. He further explains

that translation skill should be developed during the learning process because it is an integral part of language learning.

Findings by Guerra (2014) obtained from interviews with 155 first- and second-year university students suggest that translation is used for several reasons. It helps them understand forms and contents of the source language text and increase their awareness of their L1 and the target language in terms of linguistic and cultural knowledge. The most surprising ones are translation is motivating and it is the most preferred language learning tasks. However, a study conducted using both quantitative and qualitative approaches to 56 teachers and 44 teachers in an Iranian EFL context concludes that from the teachers' point of view translation is not constantly helpful and it is only useful for teaching English vocabulary and grammar, while some other teachers say L1 can interfere with learning the foreign language and translation is a time-consuming task (Mollaei, Taghinezhad, & Sadighi, 2017). They finally conclude that translation is useful to help students remove their psychological barriers, explain complex grammatical concepts, comprehend vocabulary, and explain target language culturally-bound concepts in a reading activity.

Liao (2006) found that learners use translation as an EFL learning strategy to master the language. This was based on findings of his study conducted to 351 Taiwanese college students learning EFL by using survey questionnaires, *the Inventory for Beliefs about Translation* (IBT), *the Inventory for Translation as a Learning Strategy* (ITLS), and *Individual Background Questionnaire* (IBQ) and an interview guide. He concludes that most of them have the belief that translation plays a significant role in their EFL learning and they use it as their EFL learning strategy, ranging from medium to high levels use of translation, to help them strengthen their EFL skills and solve linguistic problems. His findings suggest that learners whose major is foreign language and more proficient EFL learners tend to report negative beliefs about translation and they use translation as their learning strategy less frequently compared to those whose major is not foreign language and less proficient learners.

Mutlu, Bayram, & Demirbukan (2015) also conducted research on translation as a learning strategy to 118 adult EFL learners with three different levels of proficiency in Turkey by using the same questionnaire as proposed by Liao (2006), the *Inventory for Translation as a Learning Strategy* (ITLS). Their findings are in line with Liao's (2006) findings that state elementary EFL learners use strategies involving translation more often compared

to pre-intermediate and intermediate EFL learners. They use translation to help them improve their English skills and master lexical items. This suggests that the more proficient EFL learners are, the less often translation is used in their learning. A study by Dagilienė (2012) also suggests that translation is a beneficial aid for learning English vocabulary, speaking, grammar, writing, and listening.

Karimian & Talebinejad (2013), based on their study conducted to 170 Iranian EFL learners, state that translation is supporting tool in EFL classroom to help learners improve their English skills and solve their linguistic problems. L1 is used to decrease their anxiety to make them more motivated. 360 Arab EFL students are also reported to employ learning strategies involving translation to learn English vocabulary, to read and to write. Girls use learning strategies involving translation more often than boys. More proficient EFL learners are also reported to avoid mental translation. In other words, they try to think directly in the language being learnt, English. On the contrary, less proficient EFL learners use translation more often to reduce anxiety in the process of learning EFL (Al-Musawi, 2014). Thus, translation should not be totally abandoned in EFL classrooms because lower proficiency EFL learners can benefit from using L1 and translation to improve their EFL mastery. It is also suggested that translation is helpful to most new EFL learners, however, more advanced EFL learners are encouraged to think directly in English (Tan, 2015), although they are allowed to refer back to their L1 and translation to have insights into differences and similarities of L1 and L2 to improve their L2 competence (Perkins, 1985 in Tan, 2015).

CONCLUSION

In this paper, based on the empirical evidence and findings by investigators discussed above, I could say that teachers and learners' L1 and translation can be used as a helpful tool for assisting students to improve their EFL proficiency and mastery. L1 in EFL learning cannot be avoided. In other words, L1 and translation are inseparable. The presence of L1 and translation in language classrooms in many parts of the world "is doing no harm" at all (Pym & Aqvazyan, 2017, p. 404) because translation, which is pedagogically effective, is also powerful to form intercultural identities (Chan, 2015). Finally, there is still room for more further research on the issue of L1 and translation in foreign language teaching and learning (Cohen, 2001; Ellis, 2007; Kelly & Bruen, 2014) and L1 and translation should certainly be looked at more closely as a foreign language teaching method or technique (Ramsden, 2018) that the integration of L1 and translation into communicative approach, or vice versa, in foreign

language teaching and learning can be procedurally and clearly explained.

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