

## **Translation as a Tool for Teaching English in Saudi EFL Classrooms: Teachers Attitude**

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### **Abstract**

This paper goes in line with modern movement towards bringing back translation as a teaching aid and investigates the use of translation in learning English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms. The main focus of this paper is on Saudi EFL instructors' attitudes towards the use of translation as a teaching aid and explores to what extent do Saudi teachers tend to use translation in the teaching process. This research paper concludes that teachers use translation as a technique to help the student to understand better and assess the students' overall language learning experience. The findings open the venue for further investigation of this matter in other parts of the Arab world to have a broader picture of the issue in this part of the world.

*Keywords:* Saudi, language teaching, learning tool, pedagogical translation, translation

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## Introduction

Although the issue of using translation as a teaching tool in EFL classrooms has been discussed numerous times, mostly rejected or ignored due to the widespread criticism of the Grammar-Translation Method. Which eventually led to almost preventing the use of the first language (L1) in the classroom (e.g., Direct Method) neglecting the fact that during the process of learning a foreign language, the learner undergoes what is called 'cognitive translation' through which the information that the learner perceives is mapped against that of the mother tongue in which requires a comparative and contrastive analysis of the data that the learner exposed to ( Al-Amri & Abdul-Raof 2014, p.7). Nevertheless, after decades of rejecting translation as a teaching tool, translation is back in the mainstream as a teaching method, with numerous researches in favor of translation since 1990 like Duff (1989) and others. However, this paper attempt to investigate the use of translation by EFL teachers in Saudi and their attitude towards the new path of bringing back translation to the EFL classrooms.

## Literature review

Studies on the possibility of using translation tools to aid the learning process have been in the spotlight in the last decade. Modern researches have reinforced the use of translation as a tool in foreign language teaching and learning. Recent researches results have confirmed that translation activities have shown to be a potent teaching tool if used properly.

Ross (2000), in his short yet fascinating paper he touched on the problem of interference and the role of translation in the EFL classroom and present sample activities that provided a brief insight into approaches for intervention. Ross states that non-native teachers of English or English mother-tongue teachers are more likely to advocate for the translation role in the teaching language. Ross addressed the necessity to distinguish between the teaching of translation as a vocational skill and the use of translation in teaching situations as an aid to learning the language.

Dagilienė (2012) Investigated translation as a pedagogical tool and gives an analysis of the translation activities in the language classroom in advanced English learning programs at Kaunas University of Technology (KTU). Also, it sheds light on students' attitudes towards the activity. The study findings show that translation activities are a beneficial pedagogical tool for teaching a foreign language, with 58% of the students considered that translation to be a useful learning tool. Dagilienė states in his paper that when introduced purposefully and imaginatively into the language learning program, translation becomes a suitable language practice method for many students and can help students to develop their language skills (reading, speaking, writing, grammar, vocabulary).

Al-Amri and Abdul-Raof (2014) discussed in their paper the shift in a position towards the use of translation in language teaching, which recently took place, defending the grammar-translation method that has suffered from negative stereotypes. They claim that second language (L2) learning-based translation activities can develop the student's interlanguage competence rather than creating inter-language interference; in fact, well-selected activities can reduce L1

interference (negative transfer) and intervention (see page 4). They are considering translation as a "fifth" language skill as some other linguist as well (Newmark 1991, p.62; Ross 2000, p.6). Likewise, reviewing the techniques that can be used to assist in learning a foreign language through translation and how to benefit from translation in reading, writing, listening, speaking, and vocabulary development (collocation of word, idiomatic expression, synonyms).

Kavaliauskienė and Kaminskienė (2007) carried out a critical study that examines students' perceptions of mother tongue application and mental translation in learning English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and describes the activities which raise learners' awareness of language use. The study findings show that the autonomously generated translation activities help raise learners' awareness of language transfer and may facilitate linguistic development.

Fernández Guerra (2015) carried out a study on students' attitudes toward the use of translation in foreign language learning, which discusses the arguments against the use of translation in learning a foreign language and the adequacy of translation tasks in learning a foreign language. The study shows that students' attitudes were extremely positive because translation could help them acquire knowledge about the source and the target cultures, improve their knowledge of language dialects, improve lexical knowledge, acquire more fluency, improve their knowledge of pragmatic conventions, raise awareness of the differences between both linguistic systems, and improve grammatical knowledge.

Giaber (2016), according to the author, the study is an attempt to explore aspects of the use of translation by EFL teachers in the classroom in Tripoli and nearby areas (a descriptive study). The study is based on data collected via a questionnaire from 171 teachers of English holding different qualifications. The findings confirm that translation is widely used as a technique to check students' understanding, help students clarify the meanings of linguistic units, increase students' vocabulary, develop students' ability of contrastive analysis, and assess students' overall language learning. These findings support new research worldwide in favor of controlled use of translation in foreign language teaching and learning.

Samardali and Ismael (2017) Examine translation as a tool in EFL. The study shows that some instructors tend to use translation as a tool to aid the teaching process mainly in explaining ambiguous vocabulary, discuss grammar, teaching idiomatic expressions, explaining reading passages, comparing and contrasting between L1 and L2, as well as checking the students' reading and listening comprehension.

### **Purpose of the study**

Even though the issue of translation in language teaching has been discussed by many writers around the world, to the best of my knowledge, it is still overlooked in Saudi Arabia and the Arab world in general, there are few previous studies in the subject. The study aims to go in line with the modern views on the use of transition as a teaching tool, as Cook (2010) argues that "for the most contemporary language teachers, translating should be a major aim and means of language learning, and a major measure of success." (p. 15). He adds that "translation has an important role to play in language learning – that it develops both language awareness and use, that it is

pedagogically effective and educationally desirable and that it answers student needs in the contemporary globalized and multicultural world" (p. 155) and as Duff states that "translation happens everywhere, all the time, so why not in the classroom?" (p. 6). Consequently, the study focuses' mainly on Saudi EFL instructors' attitude towards the use of translation as teaching aid and to have a clear idea on to which extent do Saudi teachers tend to use translation in the teaching process.

## The study

### *The Sample*

This descriptive study was conducted on 63 Saudi instructors who teach English as a foreign language in schools, universities, and language centers.

## Methodology

The study is based on primary data collected from 63 teachers of English via a questionnaire. The use of questionnaire is due to its convenience in collecting data, and it allows participants to answer the given questions at their own selected time. The questionnaire included both closed questions and open-ended questions to allow the participants to express their opinions. The questionnaire language was simple language to avoid any ambiguity, and participants were allowed to use Arabic if they want to.

The questionnaire was sent as a link with a note that included the purpose of the study and the relevance of the study to the respondents. In the note, it was also made clear that participation in the study was voluntary, and the anonymity of information was guaranteed.

The questionnaire was sent to 63 male/female teachers holding different qualifications and teaching different language levels in different states and private institutions. These institutions included universities, schools, and language centers.

The questionnaire was divided into three parts. The first part included background questions about nationality, sex, qualification, type of employment, and their students' level. The second part was translation-related questions, which included closed questions on their agreement and disagreement with the use of translation in teaching EFL and on modern researchers' statements on translation in teaching languages. The last part was open-ended questions that can be left empty (in case they do not use translation) on their use of translation and the reason they use it and how they use it.

## Data Analysis

Table 1. *Background information*

Question	Percentage
Qualification	Bachelor's degree 81%
	Master's degree 19%
Sex	Male 50.8%
	Female 49.2%
The teaching institution	School 61.9%
	University 25.4%

	Language Center 9.5%
	Retired teacher 1.6%
	International Business 1.6%
Language levels taught	Beginner 19%
	Elementary 28.6%
	Intermediate 63.5%
	Advanced 28.6%

The questionnaire was sent to 63 Saudi teachers, 32 males, and 31 females. Fifty-one teachers hold a BA degree, and 12 teachers hold a MA degree. The teachers worked in various institutions the majority teach at schools 39, 16 teach at universities, six teach at language centers, one is a retired teacher, and one teaches at international business. Their student's language levels differ 40 teach intermediate level students, 18 teach elementary level students, and the same number of teachers teach advanced, and 12 teach beginner students.

Table 2. *Distribution of teachers*

Teachers who use translation	85.7%
Teachers who do not use translation	14.3%

In answering the central question: Do you use translation as a teaching tool? Fifty-four teachers chose "Yes," and only nine teachers chose "No." Thus, the vast majority of teachers use translation as a tool to aid teaching English as a foreign language.

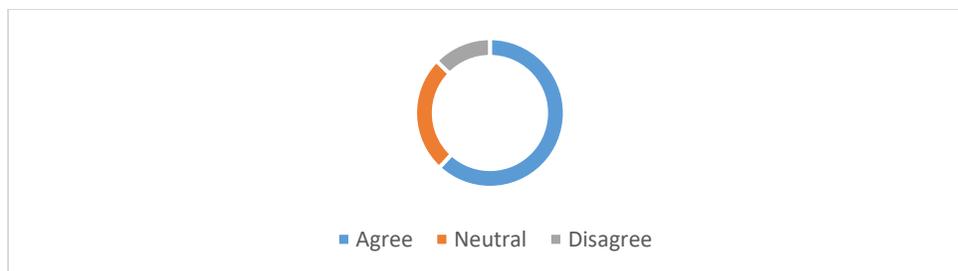


Figure 1. Teachers' attitudes towards modern researchers and writers' statements on the adequacy of translation in teaching.

In answering the question, do you agree with the modern researchers and writers' statements regarding the adequacy of translation in teaching? Thirty-nine teachers, which is more than half, chose "Agree," 16 chose "Neutral," and only eight chose "Disagree."

**Reasons for using translation**

63 reasons were submitted; the most common reason was to clarify certain words or concepts that may be ambiguous to the learner; other reasons were given, such as:

- It is unavoidable sometimes, even though we must keep it as the ultimate solution.
- To make the students engage in the lesson.

- Some beginner students will not understand unless you use translation.
- The students show a positive attitude if some translation is used.
- To facilitate complicated concepts.
- It put students at ease.
- It helps facilitate learning since it tends to make students make a connection between what they are learning and their native language.

### ***The need for translation***

As for the answer to the question: If you use the translation, when do you use it? Fifty-four answers were submitted the most common answer is: In explaining grammar other reasons were given as: in explaining new vocabulary, translating passages to make sure that the students understand what they are dealing with when an unfamiliar concept to the learner is introduced if the students are unable to understand when presenting new vocabulary, and in teaching idioms.

### ***How translation is used***

In answering the last question: How do you use translation in teaching English? 31 answers were submitted nine teachers said using machine translation or dictionary other ways were provided, such as:

- Using synonyms.
- Brainstorm the student to let them understand by themselves.
- After they explain the lesson, they translate to the students.
- Translate some words as the ultimate solution.
- Using writing and speaking translation activities.
- By asking the students for equivalents in their native language.
- By code-switching

### **Study Findings**

Based on the above descriptive analysis of the data collected from the 63 teachers of English as a foreign language, the following findings are made:

1. Translation is widely used by EFL teachers in Saudi.
2. Some teachers still support old methods that don't allow L2 and any type of translation in the teaching process.
3. The use of translation by the teachers is due to their need to engage their students or facilitate the teaching process.
4. The teachers' use of translation is very basic, sticking to a direct translation of words, phrases, or grammar mostly conducted by the teacher without student involvement, and only a few translation activities that involved the learner was mentioned.
5. The study shows no relationship between the teachers' age, sex, qualification, type of employment, type of institution, or language level taught and the use of translation in the EFL classroom.

### **Conclusion**

The study was conducted on sixty-three teachers via a questionnaire to explore the aspects of translation use in Saudi EFL classrooms. The aim of the study was to find out if the translation is used and how EFL teachers use it and whether the teachers agree or disagree with the views of modern researchers and writers on the use of translation in foreign language teaching. The study findings confirm that translation is widely used in the teaching process to help the students understand and assess their overall learning. These findings support the new approach worldwide in favor of controlled use of translation in foreign language teaching and learning. The findings open the venue for further investigation of this issue in other parts of the Arab world in order to have a broader picture of the issue in this part of the world.

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#### Appendix

The Use of Translation in Teaching EFL in Saudi

(Feel free to answer in Arabic)

\*Must be answered

Are you Saudi? \*

Yes

No

Your qualification: \*

Bachelor's degree

Master's degree

Other:

Your gender: \*

Male

Female

The institution that you teach at: \*

School

University

Language Center

Other:

Choose the language levels that you teach: \*

Beginner

Elementary

Intermediate

Advanced

Do you use translation as a teaching tool? \*

Yes

No

Recent studies have proven that translation, if used correctly, could help learners acquire and improve their language skills. (see Russ 2000, Cook 2010, and others)

Do you agree with the modern researchers and writers' statements towards the adequacy of translation in teaching? \*

Agree

Neutral

Disagree

Why do you use or not use translation in teaching? \*

If you use translation in teaching: When do you use translation in teaching English?

How do you use translation in teaching English?

