

USE OF TRANSLATION IN TEACHING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

Orazimbetov Shingisbek

University of Innovation Technologies, acting associate professor of the department of Philology

Akkasinova Sayora

University of Innovation Technologies, a student of the group 1-FT-23

Abstract. *Translation has long been an essential tool in teaching foreign languages. Its use facilitates comprehension, reinforces vocabulary, and enhances grammatical understanding. Modern educational approaches integrate translation selectively to improve learners' accuracy and communication skills. Despite debates over its effectiveness, research indicates that strategic translation can support language acquisition when combined with interactive and communicative methods. This article examines the benefits, challenges, and practical applications of translation in language classrooms, providing insights for teachers to optimize its role in enhancing students' linguistic competence.*

Keywords: *Translation, Language learning, Communicative method, Vocabulary, Accuracy, Comprehension, Teaching strategies, L2 acquisition, Grammar, Classroom techniques, Bilingual approach, Learner support, Error correction, Pedagogy, Educational technology.*

INTRODUCTION

Foreign language teaching has often emphasized monolingual approaches, which tend to discourage the use of translation in classrooms. Traditionally, it was believed that relying on learners' first language (L1) could slow down their acquisition of the target language (L2), as learners might become dependent on translation instead of practicing the second language directly. However, recent perspectives show that translation can play an important and strategic role in language learning. By connecting L1 and L2, learners can better understand meaning, clarify complex structures, and expand their vocabulary. Translation also encourages reflection on how languages work, fostering learners' meta-linguistic awareness. Guy Cook (2010) argues that "Translation has an important pedagogical role, acting as a bridge by helping learners relate their own language to the target language, enhancing understanding, and developing language awareness" [1]. According to this view, translation is not merely an outdated method; it is a valuable tool that can support comprehension and deepen learners' awareness of both languages when used appropriately. The aim of this study is to investigate how translation can be effectively integrated into modern language classrooms. Specifically, it seeks to examine ways translation can enhance comprehension, grammar knowledge, vocabulary acquisition, and overall communicative competence, without replacing interactive and communicative learning practices. This approach allows teachers to combine the cognitive benefits of translation with active language use in meaningful contexts.

Foreign language teaching has traditionally emphasized monolingual approaches, often discouraging the systematic use of translation in classrooms. Wolfgang Butzkamm (2003) challenges this view by highlighting the central role of the mother tongue in learning a foreign

language. He states, “the mother tongue is the greatest asset people bring to the task of foreign language learning and provides a Language Acquisition Support System” [2]. This assertion emphasizes that L1 should not be considered merely a fallback resource; rather, it is a strategic tool to facilitate understanding, support vocabulary acquisition, and enhance grammatical awareness. Butzkamm argues that learners’ prior linguistic knowledge, if activated effectively, can make the process of acquiring a second language more efficient, meaningful, and cognitively enriching. He advocates practical classroom strategies such as code-switching, in which learners alternate between L1 and L2 during instruction, and “mother tongue mirroring,” a method in which students compare L2 expressions with their L1 equivalents. Through these methods, learners actively notice differences in syntax, vocabulary, and idiomatic usage, which strengthens meta-linguistic awareness and supports comprehension. Butzkamm further asserts, “translation can help learners to make the invisible visible and to see the target language through the lens of their own language”. In other words, translation allows learners to perceive subtle distinctions between languages that might otherwise remain unnoticed, helping them understand not just individual words but also larger patterns of meaning and structure. By translating sentences from L1 to L2 and back, learners engage in reflective analysis, consider multiple alternatives, and evaluate the appropriateness of different grammatical forms. This process fosters both critical thinking and problem-solving abilities, as learners are required to select the most accurate linguistic choices and consider nuances in meaning. In Butzkamm’s framework, translation does not replace communicative practice but complements it by providing a cognitive bridge between prior knowledge and new language input.

In contrast, Ángeles Carreres (2006) offers a more cautious perspective, emphasizing the potential pitfalls of excessive reliance on translation in communicative classrooms. She warns, “excessive translation can lead to artificial exercises that prioritize written accuracy over spoken fluency” [3]. Carreres also introduces the concept of “inverse translation,” explaining that “learners may habitually think in L1 before producing L2, which can slow down the development of spontaneous communication skills.” This phenomenon highlights the risk of overusing translation: while it can clarify meaning, it can also inhibit fluency, encouraging learners to rely on constant internal translation rather than thinking directly in the target language. Nevertheless, Carreres acknowledges the value of translation as a supporting tool, provided it is used carefully and selectively. Well-designed translation exercises can clarify complex grammar, illuminate idiomatic expressions, and deepen learners’ understanding of nuanced meanings. For example, a brief comparison of two equivalent expressions in L1 and L2 allows learners to reflect on syntactic and lexical choices without overwhelming communicative practice. Carreres emphasizes that translation should never dominate class time but rather complement interactive activities, reinforcing comprehension, analytical thinking, and cultural understanding. Her balanced approach encourages teachers to integrate translation in a way that enhances learning while preserving the primary goal of fostering spontaneous communication. By advocating careful, strategic use of translation, Carreres demonstrates that it can be both cognitively enriching and communicatively supportive when applied thoughtfully.

María González Davies (2004) offers a complementary perspective that focuses on integrating translation into interactive, project-based, and collaborative learning environments. She asserts, “translation is not merely a linguistic exercise; it is a process of mediation where learners negotiate meaning across languages” [4]. González Davies recommends a structured progression in translation tasks: beginning with simple phrase-level exercises, moving to full-text translation, and culminating in collaborative projects where students discuss linguistic and cultural differences. For instance, a class activity might involve translating a short story, comparing multiple student translations, and reflecting on differences in interpretation. This approach encourages learners to engage actively, negotiate meaning, and consider context, cultural references, and stylistic choices. She further explains, “embedding translation within interactive tasks helps learners develop meta-linguistic awareness, problem-solving skills, and both receptive and productive competencies.” By combining translation with discussion, peer review, and collaborative projects, learners develop both analytical and communicative skills simultaneously. Translation thus becomes a cognitive tool and a social process, bridging understanding and communication. González Davies’ methodology also highlights the intercultural benefits of translation: when students negotiate meaning, they become aware of cultural nuances and develop skills to communicate effectively across languages. This holistic approach demonstrates that translation need not be isolated or mechanical; when thoughtfully integrated, it can enrich classroom practice and foster deeper engagement with language, culture, and communication.

Together, these three scholars provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the strategic potential of translation in foreign language teaching. Butzkamm presents L1 and translation as foundational tools, offering clear methods for using learners’ prior knowledge to enhance comprehension, vocabulary, and grammar. Carreres emphasizes the risks of overreliance and promotes careful, selective use to maintain communicative priorities. González Davies bridges these perspectives by providing practical, interactive, and project-based approaches that combine analytical reflection with collaborative learning. By linking cognitive, communicative, and intercultural dimensions, these scholars demonstrate that translation is neither outdated nor secondary. When applied thoughtfully, it enhances understanding, strengthens meta-linguistic awareness, improves both receptive and productive skills, and supports learners in negotiating meaning effectively across languages. In sum, the integration of translation in modern language classrooms requires a strategic, balanced, and interactive approach. Teachers can leverage L1 and translation to support comprehension and vocabulary learning (Butzkamm), avoid overdependence and ensure fluency (Carreres), and embed translation into collaborative, meaningful tasks to foster problem-solving, metalinguistic awareness, and intercultural competence (González Davies). Together, these approaches illustrate a spectrum of possibilities: from translation as a cognitive bridge to translation as a supporting tool, and finally, translation as a medium for mediation and collaborative learning. Implementing these strategies can maximize the benefits of translation, demonstrating its continued relevance in contemporary foreign language pedagogy.

Translation in foreign language teaching remains a highly valuable pedagogical tool when applied strategically. Traditional monolingual approaches have often minimized or discouraged the use of translation, prioritizing immersion in the target language. However,

contemporary research demonstrates that translation can play a critical role in enhancing comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, grammatical awareness, and overall language proficiency. Butzkamm emphasizes the importance of using the mother tongue as a foundational resource to support learners' understanding of complex structures and linguistic patterns. Carreres highlights the need for careful and balanced use, cautioning against overreliance that might impede fluency, and stresses translation's role as a supporting tool rather than the central focus of instruction. González Davies demonstrates practical ways to integrate translation into interactive, project-based, and collaborative classroom activities, showing how it can enhance both cognitive and intercultural learning. The theme of this study—the strategic use of translation in modern language classrooms—is reinforced through these perspectives. Translation can bridge learners' first and second languages, allowing them to analyze structures, clarify meaning, and develop meta-linguistic awareness. It also encourages active engagement with language, supporting not only reading and writing but also speaking and problem-solving skills. When incorporated thoughtfully, translation complements communicative and interactive teaching methods, strengthens analytical thinking, and promotes deeper engagement with both linguistic and cultural aspects of the target language.

In conclusion, translation is not an outdated or secondary technique but a versatile and dynamic instructional tool. Its strategic implementation enhances comprehension, promotes linguistic and cultural competence, and supports learners in developing a more reflective, confident, and effective approach to communication in a foreign language. Modern language classrooms benefit from the thoughtful integration of translation, which fosters both academic understanding and practical language use, aligning with the overarching goal of developing proficient and adaptable language learners.

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