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Research Article

University Students' Perspectives on Translation Tasks in EFL Classes: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

The growing recognition of English as a vital tool for academic and professional advancement has prompted the Moroccan Ministry of Higher Education to mandate English instruction for undergraduate and postgraduate students across all disciplines. Traditionally, English language instruction in Moroccan universities has adhered to monolingual approaches that discourage the use of students' first language (L1). However, the systematic integration of translation tasks may offer pedagogical benefits, particularly for learners with limited English proficiency. This qualitative study investigates university students' attitudes toward incorporating translation exercises in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes. Over the course of one semester, a Master's-level English class engaged in structured translation tasks. Subsequently, 25 students participated in individual structured interviews. Thematic analysis of the responses revealed that students held positive perceptions of translation tasks, citing their role in enhancing vocabulary acquisition, building self-confidence, and promoting active classroom participation.

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Introduction

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The role of translation in foreign language (FL) instruction has long sparked academic debate, particularly concerning its pedagogical value and potential drawbacks. This issue is especially salient in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, where students' first language (L1) frequently intersects with the target language (L2) during instruction. Historically, the use of L1 in FL classrooms has been perceived as a hindrance to language acquisition. Foundational theories by Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982) suggest that reliance on L1 contributes to errors and obstructs authentic L2 development. In response, many FL teaching approaches have promoted monolingual methods to ensure maximum exposure to L2 input (Willis, 1981; Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

While the monolingual approach remains dominant, its assumptions have increasingly been challenged. Critics of L1 use argue that translation reduces valuable L2 exposure (Dujmović, 2007) and diminishes learners' opportunities for communicative competence (Swift, 2006). Pavón and Ramos (2019) similarly caution that L1 may hinder L2 development, particularly in settings where naturalistic exposure to English is limited. However, this stance has been met with growing skepticism. Recent scholarship highlights that a rigid exclusion of L1 may be pedagogically restrictive and overlook its potential as a scaffolding tool. Translation, when applied systematically and purposefully, may foster vocabulary development, improve learner confidence, and promote classroom engagement (Pavón & Ramos, 2019). Despite these emerging perspectives, limited empirical research has explored students' own views regarding the incorporation of translation tasks in EFL university settings.

To address this gap, the present study investigates Moroccan university students' attitudes toward the use of translation tasks in EFL classrooms. It aims to explore whether integrating L1 through short, structured translation activities supports vocabulary acquisition and enhances learners' motivation and participation. In doing so, this research contributes to the ongoing discussion on the pedagogical role of L1 in EFL instruction and offers practical insights for language educators operating in multilingual environments.

1.1. Objectives and research questions

This study aims to shed light on the implementation of translation tasks in teaching English to university students. It intends to investigate university students' reactions and views about incorporating shortly-designed translation exercises in EFL English classes. For the purpose of attaining the objectives of this research, two research questions were postulated:

1.1.1. How do university students react to introducing translation tasks in the English class?

1.1.2. What are university students' views about the suggestion of using translation tasks in the EFL class?

Literature Review

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Position of translation in FL teaching methods

Generally, the use of translation in foreign language teaching has been deeply affected by theorists' discouraging views regarding learners' first language. Accordingly, L1 has assumed some role within few methods. However, most common EFL teaching approaches have either marginalized or totally banned all forms of L1 in FL classes. The grammar translation method (henceforth GTM) is the only method wherein translation practice is advocated and considered central to the teaching process. Provided the fact that GTM is the most common bilingual method to foreign language teaching, much focus within it is placed on inviting learners to translating decontextualized sentences along with placing more emphasis on grammatical rules (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Following this methodology makes the use of the learners' native language the major teaching and learning tool underlying the GTM.

With regard to the other teaching methods, L1 does not enjoy the same value it has within the GTM. The use of translation as a teaching tool has been disvalued for various reasons. The most striking views against L1 have been claimed by the proponents of the communicative method to foreign language teaching. In light of its fundamental principles, the communicative approach strongly considers that the use of translation-based teaching activities or any other form of L1 in foreign language classrooms should be avoided arguing that translation cannot allow communication and that it reduces learners' exposure to L2 (Swift, 2006) which is in line with the contention that FL learners should be exposed to L2 as much as possible (Harmer, 2007; Byram, 2004).

The other monolingual methods to the teaching of English as a foreign language were also deeply affected by the above-mentioned philosophy underlying the communicative approach. Accordingly, the use of translation in FL teaching within these methods has either been excluded or at least marginalized. In this context, EFL teachers are strictly urged in the light of the one-language teaching methods (Willis, 1981) to do all they can to avoid using translation in language classes. Within monolingual teaching methods, such as the direct method, teachers are encouraged to use any other means available to reach students, including use of mimes, gestures, realia and pictures but to resort to translation (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). A focused review of the position and role of L1/translation in the commonly followed teaching methods is provided in table 1 below.

Table 1. Position of Translation within EFL Teaching Methods

Teaching methods	Position and role of translation
The Grammar Translation Method	Lessons explained in L1 and translation exercises constitute the main focus of the lesson
The Direct or Natural method	mother tongue use is to be avoided totally
The Audio-lingual Method	translation is not allowed in class
Total Physical Response Method	Translation is to be de-emphasized
The Structural Approach	Translation is marginalized and replaced by aural work
Task-based Method	Translating is not emphasized. Focus is on the target language

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Content-based method	Translation is marginalized
The Silent Way	Translation to be avoided
Suggestopedia	Translation is disregarded
Community Language Learning Method	Translation is conditionally allowed. Can be used by the teacher to clarify instructions

Note. This table displays the position of translation within methods to EFL teaching based on *Approaches and methods in language teaching* (2nd ed) by J, C. Richards & T, S. Rodgers, 2001.

Avoiding translation

The most salient arguments against the implementation of L1 in foreign language teaching have come with the reform movement to foreign language teaching (Hall & Cook, 2012). Additionally, research carried out in the same field has shown that translation should be avoided for several reasons which mainly underline the idea that translation is detrimental to FL learning. In a study carried out by Carreres (2006), it is argued that L1 is generally harmful to foreign language learning on the grounds that it stops students from expressing themselves freely. Similarly, it was claimed by Phillipson (2014) that using the mother tongue hinders the learning process. This stance of refusal has led to calling for a total exclusion of the mother language. Alternatively, it has been claimed that a foreign language must be taught in a monolingual method provided that standards of the foreign language taught are very likely to drop when L1 is used as contended by Phillipson (2014).

A Further reason for banning L1 in class was stressed by Swift (2006) who is in line with Phillipson (2014) on the fact that L2 should be taught through L2. In the same sense, Swift adds that L2 class time must not be wasted on using translation in class (Swift, 2006). Furthermore, she advocates the idea that the more students are exposed to L2 the better their fluency becomes in that language. In harmony with this, Hall and Cook (2012) claim that foreign languages should be taught monolingually refusing the suggestion of using L1 totally. They believe in the positive impact of getting learners deeply immersed in real-life like situations of foreign language learning. Doing so, Hall and Cook (2012) see that banning all forms of L1 is effective to guarantee a maximum exposure to the target language. This view was previously underlined and confirmed by other experts in the field including Krashen (2004) and Auerbach (1993). However, there were other voices which objected to banning translation for research-based justifications.

Supporting L1 incorporation

While much has been said about banning any resort to L1 in foreign language classes, interesting research has been carried out to investigate a beneficial role of implementing L1 in foreign language classes. In this regard, a strong claim has been made by Deller and Rinvolucri (2008) who opposes banning translation considering that it is impractical to eliminate L1 in FL teaching. Stressing the importance of using translation in FL learning, Deller and Rinvolucri strongly believe that there is much connection between L1 and L2 in that the former constitutes the source for the latter to exist (Deller & Rinvolucri, 2008). Going in line with this argument, Widdowson (2003) sees that the learning process of any foreign language is basically bilingual because learners start their learning journey with one language, which is L1. This claim allows the conclusion that avoiding L1 is cognitively and practically impossible. Additionally, Popovic (2001) claims that it does not make sense to ban the inclusion of

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translation in FL classes believing that L1-related exercises can help promote learning foreign languages.

More recently, research has shown that it is high time to recognize the unfairness of banning L1 in FL classes. On the psychological level, it is argued that the use of L1 in FL teaching is believed to help create a motivating learning atmosphere and lower the levels of anxiety in learners (Lewis, 2009). More importantly, Ambele and Watson Todd (2021) contend that L1 should have some room in FL teaching environments for it can be beneficial to learning. In line with these claims, Ambele (2020) stresses the fact that L1 can be a source of support for L2 learners which can be implemented effectively to facilitate learning. Highlighting the need for a possible incorporation of L1 in FL classes, Wei (2018) contends that its exclusion is not possible on the grounds that FL learners normally employ their overall linguistic knowledge in learning a target language comprising their L1 knowledge, particularly in building understanding of L2 content. In connection with these, it has recently been argued that L2 students can develop their learning when they have the chance to use their L1 in class systematically (Garcia & Otheguy, 2020).

Research Methodology

Context and participants

Context

This study was conducted within the context of Morocco's ongoing educational reforms, particularly the nationwide initiative to enhance English language proficiency among university students. In alignment with this vision, the Ministry of Higher Education has mandated English language instruction across undergraduate and postgraduate programs, with the objective of improving students' academic competence and employability in a globalized workforce. As Dalton-Puffer (2011) notes, English functions as a key medium of scientific, academic, and professional communication.

Despite these efforts, English instruction in Moroccan secondary schools primarily follows a competency-based curriculum that discourages the use of students' first language (L1). Given this context, university students often enter higher education without having achieved sufficient mastery of English, which poses challenges to effective EFL instruction. As a response, the integration of translation tasks may offer pedagogical support, particularly for learners transitioning from L1-exclusive instruction. This study was conducted at the Larache Multidisciplinary Faculty in northern Morocco, where the broader institutional framework emphasizes English language development across non-English majors.

Participants

The study involved a cohort of Master of Arts (MA) students enrolled in a general EFL course. A total of 47 students were initially exposed to short, structured translation tasks integrated into the EFL curriculum over the course of one academic semester. At the end of the semester, 25 students voluntarily consented to participate in the research by taking part in one-on-one structured interviews. Participation was based on informed consent, and all respondents were assured confidentiality and anonymity.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to reflect the broader student

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population attending university-mandated English courses, excluding those majoring in English language studies. The final sample consisted of 25 postgraduate students aged between 23 and 45 years, representing diverse academic disciplines. Given that English classes are uniformly offered across departments (two hours per week), the sample is considered contextually representative of university learners' EFL experiences.

Data collection instruments and analysis

To explore students' perceptions of translation tasks in EFL classrooms, a qualitative research design was employed. Structured interviews were chosen as the primary data collection method to ensure consistency in questioning while allowing for individual expression of attitudes and experiences. Each interview was conducted at the end of the semester, following a prolonged classroom exposure to translation tasks. Interview questions focused on students' experiences, perceived benefits, and suggestions for the integration of translation activities in English instruction (see Appendix for sample questions).

All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) identification of potential themes, (4) review of themes, (5) definition and naming of themes, and (6) final report production. Codes were generated inductively, allowing themes to emerge directly from the data rather than being imposed a priori. Patterns and recurring insights were organized into thematic categories that addressed the study's research questions.

This analytic approach ensured a systematic and rigorous interpretation of the qualitative data, enabling the researchers to capture the nuanced perspectives of students regarding the pedagogical role of translation in EFL learning.

Results and Discussion

Results

Themes obtained from interview analysis

Attempting to investigate university students' views towards the use of translation tasks in higher education EFL classes, thematic analysis of the collected information allowed the generation of themes which can serve as a basis to build a clear idea about the interviewees' viewpoint. Thematically, translation tasks were considered as a *vocabulary development source*, *motivation technique* and an *effective teaching technique*. Tables 2, 3, 4 below display the results obtained from analysing the interviews' content thematically.

Vocabulary Development Source

Table 2. Deduction of theme 1

THEME	CODES	STUDENTS' ANSWERS
Vocabulary development source	Vocabulary development tool	**S3**: For me, the method is effective. Using translation tasks give students the chance to

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	Effective way to learn new vocabulary	develop their vocabulary and enrich their knowledge. **S4**: translation tasks are effective and practical to build vocabulary, but it may not be enough if it was not combined with other activities like speaking and listening because it focus on the written form. **S7**: Concerning the incorporation of translation exercises in the English class, I consider it very beneficial as it helps in expanding our linguistic knowledge. **S13**: In my opinion this type of tasks is very effective especially for learning new vocabulary. **S9**: verily, the use of translation in teaching is beneficial as long as students like me may lack vocabulary; therefore, this technique is effective to enrich students' knowledge in English. **S11**: In my viewpoint, the translation exercises that we do in class have much importance for me to develop my vocabulary as well as learn new things and develop comprehension in English. **S18**: As for translation, I find it moderately difficult because of some complicated terms. However, with practice we can build strong vocabulary in English which will improve our language skills and pronunciation. **S23**: From my perspective implementing translation exercises has various benefits for the students because it helps cements vocabulary in students' minds.

Motivation Technique

Table 3. Deduction of theme 2

THEME	CODES	STUDENTS' ANSWERS
Motivation technique	Allowing engagement and in-class participation Enhancement of self-confidence	**S1**: Using translation tasks was engaging and interesting way which proved to be highly beneficial through exciting exercises designed by the professor which expanded student's vocabulary and enhanced their participation. **S8**: I see that incorporating translation tasks in the EFL class is beneficial for me because it offers effective practice for phrases and terms in an engaging may and has a role in enriching the students' linguistic knowledge. **S10**: For me, I find it intelligent to include translation in EFL class. I really find it enjoyable as it provides the chance to think deeply and participate. **S21**: For me, incorporating translation tasks in the English class because we move from translating words to using them in class in forming sentences. I like it because it provokes our curiosity for more learning.

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	S19: I benefited a lot from the strategy of incorporating translation in the English class simply because it motivates students to build their comprehension as well as learning. **S17**: these translation exercises are beneficial for us provided the fact that all students sometimes feel hesitant to participate. Thanks to translation tasks students feel more active during the class and participate without fear because their self-confidence grows. **S20**: I find that translating is important to keep going.

Effective Teaching Technique

Table 4. Deduction of theme 3

THEME	CODES	STUDENTS' ANSWERS
Effective teaching technique	Source of benefit for students	**S2**: for me, it is perfect. **S5**: I have no problem with the use of translation exercises. I benefitted from that
	Important teaching/learning tool	**S6**: Using translation exercises is very important to learn about other subjects in English. **S12**: I think all the translation exercises we do in class are good. **S16**: In my view, the use of translation as a teaching technique is effective in easing comprehension of the content. **S24**: For me, translation exercises is the best method to activate memory, regain some vocabulary and acquire new others. **S25**: In my opinion, this type of exercises is very important to discover more about the major and learn new vocabulary. **S15**: In my opinion, the method how we study English is very comfortable. We enjoy practising English with a lot of vocabulary. It is very interesting. **S17**: I believe that translation tasks are of benefit for all the students, especially those who show a very weak mastery of English. **S22:** using translation exercises is very beneficial because of students' level of English.

Discussion

Based on the results shown in table 2 above, three major themes were obtained. Translation tasks were straightforwardly regarded by the interviewees as a source of benefit for EFL leaning through promoting *vocabulary development, being a tool of motivation and an effective teaching technique*. Obtaining these themes from the analysis of their responses about the topic investigated, it is concluded that university students hold positive attitudes towards incorporating short translation tasks in the EFL class. This finding about investing translation exercises finds support in the

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findings of studies carried out on the same topic previously.

Considering the use of translation tasks in EFL class as a vocabulary development source, interviewees argued that translations tasks play a great role. In this regard, **S3** states that "… the method is effective. Using translation tasks give students the chance to develop their vocabulary and enrich their knowledge". Similarly, **S7** finds that "the incorporation of translation exercises in the English class […] very beneficial as it helps in expanding our linguistic knowledge". Not very differently from these statements, **S9** stresses the idea that translation exercises help develop vocabulary saying that "the use of translation in teaching is beneficial as long as students like me may lack vocabulary; therefore, this technique is effective to enrich students' knowledge in English". In the same vein, **S23** believes the same arguing that "implementing translation exercises has various benefits for the students because it helps cements vocabulary in students' minds".

The interviewees' claims of regarding translation tasks as a strong source for vocabulary development find support in the findings of the previous research. In this specific regard, Ambele and Watson Todd (2021) argue that L1 can be beneficial to learning in FL classes, particularly when they stress the idea that translation should be incorporated in language classes. Additionally, Deller and Rinvolucri (2008) back this finding up by seeing that L1 and L2 are very strongly connected meaning that using translation is obviously justified given the fact that students in FL classes cannot be stopped from using their mother language.

Expressing their positive standpoint about translation tasks, interviewees emphasised the fact that investing L1 in the form of translation exrcises is an effective teaching tool to increase students' motivation in the EFL class. In this context, **S17** claims that "these translation exercises are beneficial for us provided that all students sometimes feel hesitant to participate. Thanks to translation tasks students feel more active during the class and participate without fear because their self-confidence grows". In harmony with this, **S10** sees that translation tasks are "enjoyable as they provide the chance to think deeply and participate". In line with this, **S21** argues that these exercises "provoke our curiosity for more learning". In his opinion, **S15** sees that, "the method we study English is very comfortable. We enjoy practising English with a lot of vocabulary. It is very interesting". In a similar way, **S17** believes that "translation tasks are of benefit for all the students, especially those who show a very weak mastery of English".

In light of this, Widdowson (2003) supports university students' positive attitude by emphasising the idea that the learning process of any foreign language is mainly a bilingual process in which the use of L1 can benefit learning. More support for the finding that students perceive incorporating translation tasks positively can be found in Ambele's (2020) claims when he contends that L1 can be a source of support for L2 learners which can be implemented effectively to facilitate learning. More backing can be sought in Lewis (2009) contention in that the use of L1 in FL classes is very likely to help create a motivating learning atmosphere and lowers the levels of anxiety which learners may experience in such classes. What supports university students' positive attitude more is Popovic (2001) claims about using translation in that it is not acceptable to ban translation in FL classes and the strong belief that translation tasks can help enhance learning foreign languages. Besides, Garcia and Otheguy (2020) provide support for the finding that students are positive about translation tasks when they argue that FL learners promote their learning when they are allowed to use their L1 in class.

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Concluding Remarks

The findings of this study highlight the pedagogical value of incorporating translation tasks into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction at the university level. Student responses indicate that translation exercises can serve as effective tools for enhancing vocabulary acquisition, reinforcing linguistic comprehension, and fostering learner motivation and engagement. These outcomes challenge the prevailing assumption that L1 use inherently hinders L2 development, particularly in contexts where students have limited exposure to English.

However, the integration of translation tasks must be intentional and pedagogically grounded. Rather than reverting to outdated grammar-translation methods, instructors are encouraged to adopt a balanced approach, embedding short, purposeful translation activities into communicative and learner-centered EFL instruction. This is especially pertinent for beginner and intermediate learners, who may benefit from the cognitive scaffolding that L1 provides during their early stages of language development.

In light of these findings, it is recommended that educators reconsider rigid monolingual policies and explore strategic, evidence-based uses of translation to support learner success. Doing so can enhance the overall effectiveness of EFL teaching in multilingual environments such as Morocco, where students' linguistic backgrounds can be leveraged as a resource rather than viewed as a barrier.

Limitations of the study

The present study, as the case of any research, has some limitations, especially in terms of the studied sample and context wherein the research was carried out. Out of the 47 university students who experienced translation tasks in class, only 25 of them had the chance to be interviewed which makes it a small population. For more generalizability of results, it could have been better to interview more students. Additionally, the study was carried out in Larache faculty, northern Morocco. For a larger context, it could have been better to interview students from other universities. Also, it could have been better if the study was carried out by another researcher to decrease the bias of reported answers. Nevertheless, these limitations pave the way for interesting lines of future research which can cater for triangulation research methods for a deeper investigation of the topic. Besides, the study offers relevant insights for educators interested in using L1 in foreign language classes.

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