

Arguments for Reinstalling Translation in the Foreign Language Teaching Classroom: Insights from CPGE English Teachers in Morocco

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Abstract

The pedagogical validity of translation in EFL teaching has been contested since the emergence of the Direct Method, causing its marginalisation in mainstream language education. This article investigates some of the main arguments that led to the exclusion of translation in EFL pedagogies. Typically, it questions the assumption that translation is exclusively useful in the training of professional translators. It also examines the extent to which translation contributes to the development of the language learners' linguistic and metalinguistic competencies, as well as its ability to facilitate cross-cultural understanding. To address those issues, this study adopts a quantitative research design and draws on data collected through a questionnaire administered to Moroccan CPGE teachers of English, eliciting their perceptions and reported practices regarding the use of translation in EFL teaching. The statistical analysis of the responses suggests that translation is perceived as helpful in the development of the learners' linguistic, metalinguistic, and communicative competencies. The findings indicate that, rather than superseded, translation can be employed as a legitimate instructional practice within language education, thereby challenging its exclusion from language teaching methodologies.

Keywords: *Cross-cultural understanding, Language pedagogy, Linguistic competence, Metalinguistic awareness, Moroccan CPGE, Translation in EFL.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The debate surrounding the place of translation in language instruction has resurfaced many times since the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) was pushed aside in favor of more fashionable pedagogies. With the rise of monolingual approaches, translation continued to exist, but often quietly and at the margins. In Morocco, for example, opposition to translation in ELT has generally relied on ready-made arguments claiming that it contributes neither to learning English nor to achieving communicative goals. These positions go back to the monolingual foundations of the Direct Method.

Today, however, language teaching operates in a very different landscape. The emphasis on diversity, intercultural awareness, and multilingual competence has encouraged educational systems to revisit earlier assumptions. Many of the newer policies acknowledge learners' linguistic repertoires rather than ignore them,

and translation naturally finds a place within these perspectives. It plays a central role in approaches that aim both to teach a foreign language and to value the languages learners bring with them.

Drawing on insights from Moroccan CPGE English teachers, this article reopens the discussion around translation. Its purpose is to show that translation is not a peripheral or outdated exercise, but a legitimate skill that supports linguistic and metalinguistic development while also facilitating communication across linguistic and cultural boundaries. For this reason, the article revisits some of the key claims that contributed to the marginalization of translation in mainstream language education, and then offers pedagogically grounded counterarguments supporting its integration as an instructional practice in the foreign-language classroom.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Historically, translation has been pushed to the margins of foreign language teaching and often treated with suspicion (Cook, 2010). Much of this rejection stems from the monolingual ideals that shaped modern language pedagogy and from the long-standing criticism directed at the Grammar Translation Method. As a result, arguments against translation have rested on several recurring claims: (1) that a bilingual approach cannot support vocabulary development; (2) that translation does not contribute to grammatical understanding or awareness of sentence structure; (3) that it offers little value for cross-cultural communication; and (4) that it belongs exclusively to the training of professional translators and interpreters, not to mainstream language classrooms (Atkinson, 1987; Duff, 1998; Malmkjær, 1998; Zojer, 2009).

In the sections that follow, I revisit these assumptions and offer counterarguments supported by survey data collected from Moroccan CPGE English teachers. The aim is to show that the exclusion of translation from classroom practice has relied more on inherited ideological positions than on pedagogical reasoning, and that translation can, in fact, function as a meaningful and purposeful activity in the foreign-language classroom when used with clear instructional intent.

1. Translation helps with vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure.

Much of what happens in contemporary English classrooms is still shaped by the monolingual principles that emerged with the Direct Method and the “mother-tongue phobia” it promoted (Smentek, 2017, p. 130). Krashen’s Monitor Hypothesis (Krashen, 1985), drawing on Chomsky’s account of language acquisition, holds that second-language learners progress through a natural route similar to that of first-language acquisition. From this perspective, unconscious learning through abundant and comprehensible input is presented as the primary – if not the only – path to successful foreign-language learning.

However, the neurological evidence suggests a more complex picture. Dong et al. (2005) showed that L2 vocabulary is stored in the same cortical region as L1 vocabulary, indicating that L1 meanings transfer to L2 forms. This implies that some degree of lexical mapping between L1 and L2 is likely to happen regardless of the learner’s intentions or the teacher’s methodological beliefs. In other words, new L2 items activate pre-existing L1 equivalents. If this is the case, then the idea of “pure” immersion becomes difficult to sustain, and translation activities can be seen not as obstacles, but as pedagogically coherent practices within foreign-language instruction.

Translation also offers clear advantages for understanding grammatical contrasts, especially with regard to tense systems and subject-verb agreement (Fisiak et al., 1978). Wysocka (1984, p. 12) reminds us that the first language “always exists as the learner’s reference system,” and can therefore be mobilized to make sense of unfamiliar grammatical constructions in the target language. Similarly, Wenzel (1994, p. 51) advocates the use of translation as a form of “conscious learning”: for beginners, it addresses foundational syntactic challenges; for more advanced learners, it highlights subtle syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic differences. Butzkamm (2003, p. 31) further argues that the mother tongue does not restrict learners – it “opens the door... to all grammars,” because it activates the universal grammatical potential shared by all humans.

A further benefit linked to translation is its role in facilitating positive transfer from L1 to L2. Gabryś-Barker (2007, p. 41) notes that explicit instruction based on learners' L1 promotes grammatical awareness and reduces negative transfer. Likewise, Smentek (2017, p. 157) maintains that translation can be used at different stages of instruction to elicit vocabulary, clarify grammatical forms, and correct errors. The literature, taken together, provides extensive evidence that translation is a legitimate and effective approach to teaching grammar.

Critiques of Krashen's monolingual model have emphasized the importance of conscious noticing (Schmidt, 1990; Widdowson, 2002) and attention to form (Long, 1991). These principles have long guided teachers' incidental comments on structure and form, even in meaning-oriented classrooms. Translation creates natural opportunities for such focus on form. Yet, as Cook (2010) observes, the scientific developments that shaped modern language teaching have rarely been applied to translation, leaving a gap between theory and practice.

Butzkamm and Caldwell (2009, p. 125) address this gap by outlining the substitution technique, where teachers provide sentences in the learners' first language and students produce target-language equivalents. These sentences reflect specific structures that the teacher intends to practice, and the repetition involved helps learners internalize abstract patterns and develop syntactic fluency. This illustrates how translation can function systematically within a language course and contribute to the development of grammatical accuracy and sentence structure.

2. Translation is not limited to professionals: a fifth skill for cross-cultural communication

Education equips learners with skills for real tasks. Taken narrowly, this could suggest that translation belongs only to aspiring professional translators and interpreters. Yet in a world that is increasingly multilingual and multicultural, translation is a routine practice in schools, workplaces, and other public settings. It appears both as straightforward meaning transfer between languages and as a form of social mediation between monolingual interlocutors from different communities (Europarat, 2020). In this sense, individual and societal needs are complementary: society requires diverse linguistic competences—including translation—while individuals depend on social structures that enable personal, academic, and professional development (Cook, 2010). Language education sits at this interface.

That translation engages the four traditional skills is evident: meaningful translation tasks require substantial reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Colina, 2000, p. 8), as well as, where relevant, signing. Beyond this integration, translation can be framed as a fifth skill, reflecting the growing demand for communication across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Although one might associate this skill exclusively with professional translators and interpreters, contemporary multilingual life—and the notion of innate bilingualism discussed by Butzkamm and Caldwell (2009)—has intensified the need for immediate, situated mediation that often precedes or replaces third-party services. From a policy perspective, the Council of Europe's inclusion of mediation in the CEFR (Europarat, 2020) signals a shift toward educating not only multilingual individuals but also social agents capable of preventing communication breakdowns and sustaining intercultural dialogue. In this light, translation merits recognition as a fifth skill within foreign-language syllabuses and curricula.

Cross-cultural understanding emerges from successful intercultural communication—exchanges that traverse linguistic forms and the cultural meanings attached to them. Miscommunication often stems from treating linguistic units as if they were culturally neutral. Translation, by contrast, foregrounds the connotative and pragmatic dimensions of language. Ehlich's (1984, p. 12) notion of a "diluted speech situation" captures this dynamic: speakers recognize that their text will be translated and adjust it for smoother transfer across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Likewise, House (2016) argues that translation requires the construction and interrogation of functional equivalence. As a classroom practice, translation therefore creates purposeful opportunities to decode and recode meanings across systems, fostering genuine intercultural communication.

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS & HYPOTHESIS

This study addresses the following questions:

Q.1. Does translation in ELT foster the learning of vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure?

Q.2. Does translation in ELT promote cross-cultural communication and understanding?

Q.3. Can translation be justifiably considered a fifth skill?

We hypothesize that translation can be treated as a fifth skill: it supports linguistic and metalinguistic development and extends cross-cultural communication and understanding.

IV. METHODOLOGY

To address these questions, we conducted a survey of Moroccan CPGE English teachers, a context in which translation forms a required component of both syllabus and assessment. The survey explored: (a) teachers' views on language-teaching methods, and (b) their responses to statements about translation as a classroom activity in English courses. Because of space constraints, this article reports the analysis and discussion of items directly related to translation.

The target population comprised 67 CPGE English teachers. We received 36 responses representing 21 CPGE centers across the country, with geographic coverage from Tangier (north) to Dakhla (south) and from Oujda (east) to Casablanca (west). Participants' experience in English teaching ranged from 5 to more than 20 years; their CPGE-specific experience ranged from 1 to more than 20 years. Respondents taught first- and second-year classes in a range of CPGE tracks, including Mathematics, Physics, Economics, Technological Sciences, Engineering Sciences, and Industrial Sciences. Given their first-hand engagement with translation in teaching and assessment, this group is well positioned to comment on its pedagogical merits and limitations. The data are quantitative and were analyzed statistically using SPSS.

V. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

5.1. Linguistic arguments

5.1.1. Translation expands vocabulary

The data on teachers' views regarding the role of translation in vocabulary acquisition show a clear tendency toward agreement. As presented in the table, 41.7% of respondents agreed and 36.1% strongly agreed, yielding a cumulative agreement of 77.8%. In contrast, only 5.6% expressed disagreement, while 16.7% remained neutral. With a mean of 4.08 and a standard deviation of 0.874, the results indicate that the majority of respondents consider translation to be an effective practice for supporting vocabulary learning.

Table 1. Frequency distribution and descriptive statistics

Response category	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Disagree	2	5.6	5.6	5.6
Indifferent	6	16.7	16.7	22.2
Agree	15	41.7	41.7	63.9
Strongly agree	13	36.1	36.1	100.0
Total	36	100.0	100.0	—

Descriptive statistics

Mean	Median	Standard deviation
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4.08	4.18 ^a	0.874
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a. Calculated from grouped data

5.1.2. *Translation helps with grammar understanding.*

The data show unanimous support for the claim that translation assists learners in understanding grammar. Not a single respondent expressed disagreement. Half of the teachers (50%) agreed with the statement, while 36.1% strongly agreed, resulting in a cumulative positive response of 86.1%. Only 13.9% of participants remained neutral. The descriptive statistics reinforce this tendency: the mean score and standard deviation both point to a clear consensus among respondents that translation contributes to learners' grasp of grammatical features in the target language.

Table 2. Frequency distribution and descriptive statistics

Response category	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Indifferent	5	13.9	13.9	13.9
Agree	18	50.0	50.0	63.9
Strongly agree	13	36.1	36.1	100.0
Total	36	100.0	100.0	—

Descriptive statistics

Mean	Median	Standard deviation
4.22	4.26 ^a	0.681

a. Calculated from grouped data

5.1.3. *Translation promotes understanding of sentence structure.*

The data for this item indicate a generally positive perception of translation as a means of supporting learners' understanding of sentence structure. 44.4% of respondents agreed with the statement, and 19.4% strongly agreed, yielding a cumulative agreement of 63.8%. In contrast, only 5.6% disagreed and another 5.6% strongly disagreed, resulting in a total disagreement rate of 11.1%. A further 25% of participants selected the neutral option. With a mean score of 3.76 and a standard deviation of 1.042, the results suggest that respondents tend to view translation as having a positive, though somewhat less uniform, effect on learners' ability to understand sentence structure in the target language.

Table.3. Frequency distribution and descriptive statistics

Response category	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Strongly disagree	2	5.6	5.6	5.6
Disagree	2	5.6	5.6	11.1
Indifferent	9	25.0	25.0	36.1
Agree	16	44.4	44.4	80.6
Strongly agree	7	19.4	19.4	100.0
Total	36	100.0	100.0	—

Descriptive statistics

Mean	Median	Standard deviation
3.67	3.76 ^a	1.042

a. Calculated from grouped data

5.2. Metalinguistic arguments

5.2.1. Translation is a fifth skill.

The data indicate that 50% of respondents consider translation to be a fifth skill, and a further 22.2% strongly agree with this view. In contrast, 13.9% disagree and 5.6% strongly disagree. Overall, the distribution of responses clearly leans toward acknowledging translation as a legitimate skill alongside the four traditional language skills. The visual representation of the results reinforces this trend, showing a dominant proportion of attitudes supporting the recognition of translation as a fully established skill in the language-learning repertoire.

Table.4. Frequency distribution and descriptive statistics

Response category	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Strongly disagree	2	5.6	5.6	5.6
Disagree	5	13.9	13.9	19.4
Indifferent	3	8.3	8.3	27.8
Agree	18	50.0	50.0	77.8
Strongly agree	8	22.2	22.2	100.0
Total	36	100.0	100.0	—

Descriptive statistics

Mean	Median	Standard deviation
3.69	3.90 ^a	1.142

a. Calculated from grouped data

5.2.2. Translating is for professionals only.

A recurrent claim in the debate on translation is that it is a practice reserved for professionals rather than for language learners. The data collected for this item point strongly in the opposite direction. 47.2% of respondents disagreed with the statement, and an additional 25% expressed strong disagreement, bringing the cumulative disagreement to 72.2%. By contrast, only 11.1% agreed, while 16.7% remained neutral. The mean and standard deviation further support this distribution, suggesting that respondents broadly reject the idea that translation should be confined to professional settings. Instead, they view it as a skill of comparable importance to reading, listening, speaking, and writing within the foreign-language classroom.

Table 5. Frequency distribution and descriptive statistics

Response category	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Strongly disagree	9	25.0	25.0	25.0
Disagree	17	47.2	47.2	72.2
Indifferent	6	16.7	16.7	88.9
Agree	3	8.3	8.3	97.2
Strongly agree	1	2.8	2.8	100.0
Total	36	100.0	100.0	—

Descriptive statistics

Mean	Median	Standard deviation
2.17	2.04 ^a	1.000

a. Calculated from grouped data

5.2.3. *Translation fosters cross-cultural understanding.*

The relationship between translation and cross-cultural understanding appears to generate mixed reactions among respondents. The largest proportion (30.6%) expressed neutrality, indicating that many teachers are uncertain about the extent to which translation contributes to cross-cultural understanding. Notably, the percentage of agreement (19.4%) is identical to that of disagreement (19.4%), suggesting an even split in perceptions. The descriptive statistics support this interpretation: the mean and median both stand at 3.28, with a relatively high standard deviation of 1.256, reflecting variability in respondents' opinions.

Although these results do not provide strong statistical support for the claim that translation enhances cross-cultural understanding, they equally offer no compelling evidence to dismiss its potential in this area. In other words, the data point to an area of pedagogical practice where teachers remain divided, and where further empirical investigation may be needed.

Table 6. *Frequency distribution and descriptive statistics*

Response category	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Strongly disagree	3	8.3	8.3	8.3
Disagree	7	19.4	19.4	27.8
Indifferent	11	30.6	30.6	58.3
Agree	7	19.4	19.4	77.8
Strongly agree	8	22.2	22.2	100.0
Total	36	100.0	100.0	—

Descriptive statistics

Mean	Median	Standard deviation
3.28	3.28 ^a	1.256

b. Calculated from grouped data

VI. DISCUSSION

The claim that translation supports vocabulary learning is central to this study, and the descriptive statistics point to a generally favorable view among teachers. This pattern is consistent with Saricoban's argument that translation helps learners determine which lexical item is appropriate in a given context (Saricoban, 2012). It also accords with Prince's experimental findings, which reported superior vocabulary recall for translation-based learning compared with context-only instruction (Prince, 1996).

With respect to grammar, the results provide strong support for the view that translation can aid learners' understanding of rule systems. This resonates with Wysocka's (1984) observation that translation enables learners to map new L2 syntactic rules onto existing L1 schemas through comparative analysis. Our findings likewise align with Murtisari et al. (2020, p. 7), who note that "the process of comparing and evaluating texts in two languages appeared to heighten students' awareness of grammatical structures, something they felt helped improve their accuracy when using English." Taken together, the evidence suggests that translation, as a guided form of conscious bilingual learning, facilitates learners' grasp of subtle grammatical similarities and differences across languages.

Our data also support the claim that translation, as a classroom activity, promotes understanding of sentence structure. Nearly half of the sample (44.4%) viewed translation favorably in this respect. This tendency is

consistent with the argument that translation cultivates learners' metalinguistic awareness and helps them discern salient rules of sentence formation in a more deductive manner. Historically, the positive impact of translation on sentence-level accuracy has endured beyond the rejection of the Grammar Translation Method. As Smentek (2017) argues, translation tasks can foreground conventional syntagmatic relations as well as morphological and lexical combinations – supporting the development of L2 writing and reinforcing knowledge of target-language syntactic structures within a contrastive framework.

Whether translation should be developed as a skill in its own right remains debated in the language-education literature. Attitudes rooted in the Direct Method's monolingual dogma have long cast doubt on translation as a legitimate goal of language teaching. Yet the responses in our study indicate a shift toward recognizing translation as a fifth skill – echoing Newmark's (1991, p. 62) position and Smentek's formulation of translation as "just as important as the four basic L2 skills" (2017, p. 178). Pedagogically, translation can be conceptualized as a composite skill that strategically integrates receptive and productive processes. This view is reinforced by contemporary conditions of global interconnection and by the communicative demands placed on citizens' bilingual repertoires. In Harris's terms, bilingual competence entails an inherent "translation competence" – a form of "natural competence" (Harris, 1977, p. 99). Considered alongside Butzkamm and Caldwell's account of natural bilingualism, it would be counterproductive for classrooms to disregard the full range of learners' natural competences, including translation.

Read beyond the numbers, the pattern in our data suggests that teachers in our sample increasingly accept translation as a legitimate classroom activity for learning and teaching language. This interpretation challenges a common claim of monolingual methodologies – that translation belongs exclusively to professional training contexts. Fraser (1996, p. 121) describes this as an "artificial barrier" erected between professional translation and pedagogical translation. Given that more than half of the world's population is bilingual or multilingual (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 3), language education must prepare learners for communicative situations that exceed the limits of narrowly monolingual approaches. One implication is the development of bi- or multilingual syllabuses that integrate authentic texts and routinely address linguistic and cultural contingencies.

Finally, our investigation of whether translation fosters cross-cultural understanding did not yield the strong positive consensus we anticipated. Descriptive statistics show a sizeable proportion of neutral responses and a near balance between agreement and disagreement. A plausible explanation is that many teachers have not systematically leveraged translation to surface intercultural contrasts within mainstream classroom practice. The CPGE context may add complexity: students are prepared for international (often French) examinations, and some pursue extended study in French institutions. On this basis, we suggest that teachers' generally positive stance toward translation as a pedagogical resource could be extended to explore its intercultural potential more deliberately. In increasingly fluid communities, there is an opportunity (and a need) to use translation as a safe, structured space for negotiating differences of meaning between local and global contexts, including engagement with the "untranslatable" or culturally incompatible.

VII. CONCLUSION

In keeping with the monolingual and communicative orientations that have shaped much of modern language teaching, translation has long been marginalized within mainstream pedagogy. This article has sought to reopen the debate by re-examining the traditional objections to translation in light of recent data from teachers who regularly incorporate translation tasks into their practice. The findings offer compelling evidence that translation deserves a more central place in mainstream EFL education in Morocco, as it enhances not only learners' linguistic competence but also their metalinguistic awareness.

We hope that the arguments presented here encourage EFL teachers to draw more deliberately on learners' existing linguistic repertoires and to consider translation as a legitimate, pedagogically meaningful resource within contemporary language-teaching methodologies.

VIII. LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This article has argued for the integration of translation into the EFL classroom. However, given the limited scope of the study, it was not possible to explore additional areas in which translation may contribute to the EFL learning process. Within the CEFR, translation is now recognized as a form of mediation, a perspective that opens new avenues for further research and pedagogical experimentation in the Moroccan context. It is also worth noting that the statistical data presented here were drawn exclusively from Moroccan CPGE English teachers. Future research would therefore benefit from collecting a broader and more diverse dataset that includes teachers from various educational settings across Morocco. Such expansion would enable a more comprehensive reassessment of the pedagogical validity of translation—whether to support its wider reintegration or to challenge it—based on well-substantiated, empirically grounded arguments.

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