

## Translation as a Learning Method in English Language Teaching

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[crossref http://dx.doi.org/10.5755/j01.sal.0.21.1469](http://dx.doi.org/10.5755/j01.sal.0.21.1469)

**Abstract.** The present paper focuses on the use of translation in helping learners to acquire, develop and strengthen their knowledge and competence in the English language. Translation integrated into the language learning practice along with generally used learning activities, such as reading, listening, writing, and vocabulary development could be defined as a “pedagogical tool”, considering that its purpose is to teach a language. Translation activities make students communicate both ways: into and from the foreign language. While translating students are incited to notice differences in structure and vocabulary, to strengthen grammatical competence, to shape their own way of thinking and to correct common mistakes that could otherwise remain unnoticed. Students can make the best out of their learning, if they are encouraged to use translation skills properly. Translation activities are used in the advanced English learning programmes at Kaunas University of Technology (KTU). This paper is based on a brief theoretical literature overview, analysis of the activities in the language classroom and analysis of the results of the survey. The findings of the survey suggest that translation is a good tool in the English language learning course aimed at enhancement of students’ foreign language skills.

**Key words:** translation, language teaching, translation method, learning tool, language skills.

### Introduction

Translation has always been the core of the controversies on whether it can be a valid and effective tool in foreign language learning. Until recently, translation was out of favour with the language teaching community. Translation as a language learning activity was considered as being unsuitable within the context of foreign language learning (Brown, 2002). It was criticized because of the close association with traditional grammar translation. Even today translation is often regarded as some kind of mechanical linguistic transfer of meaning from one language to another. It is still ignored as a useful language learning tool because of being not a communicative activity that is not suited to the general needs of the language learner. Translation is considered as time-consuming, boring, and irrelevant.

However, in the last few decades there has been an increasing interest in the translation practice in the foreign language classroom. Recently foreign language teachers have been reviving the use of translation for different learning purposes. It was observed that translation activity could be used for pedagogical purposes along with other traditional language teaching activities. Reading, grammar exercises, translation — “are in fact perceived by learners to be conducive to learning” (McDonough, 2002, p.409). The present study grew out of a long-term teaching practice and it was observed that translation as a method applied to language teaching practice induces deeper insight into the meaningful contents of the material to be taught.

The *problem* discussed in the paper is the relevance of translation for enhancing foreign language skills. The present article *aims* to prove that translation is a valid method for language practice and improvement. The *objectives* of the paper are, firstly, to describe the translation activities which raise students’ awareness of language use and, secondly, to examine the usefulness of translation in

learning English. The *methods* of the study are overview of the theoretical background, analysis of translation activities in the language classroom, and analysis of the results of the survey.

### Theoretical Background

*Translation plays a very important role in an increasingly globalised world and in increasingly multilingual Europe where it is used on daily basis (Leonardi, 2010, p.17).*

Nevertheless, translation is perceived differently by linguists, methodologists and teachers. Its use in foreign language teaching provokes a great deal of disagreement and criticism.

The main reason for this is the fact that throughout the years there have been a number of studies carried out, which have either favoured or completely ignored the use of translation as a learning method. Translation was considered as inefficient, unreliable and irrelevant. Significant limitations led to the idea that the use of translation in language learning had to be avoided.

Malmkjaer (1998, p.6) briefly summarizes the main reasons why translation fell from favour:

1. Translation is independent and radically different from the four skills which define language competence: reading, writing, speaking and listening.
2. Translation takes up valuable time which could be used to teach these four skills.
3. Translation is unnatural.
4. Translation misleads and prevents students from thinking in the foreign language.
5. Translation is a bad test of language skills.
6. Translation produces interference.
7. Translation is only appropriate for training translators.

Duff (1994) reveals further reasons why teachers objected to the use of translation in foreign language classes. The researcher stresses that translation is text-bound and

confined only to two skills — reading and writing. It is not a communicative activity as it doesn't involve oral interaction. Then the use of the mother tongue is required, which is not desirable. Moreover, it is boring, both to do and to correct.

Nevertheless, there are “significant and visible signs of a revival of translation in language teaching according to recent literature and applied linguistics” (Malmkjaer, 1998, p.1). Many theorists, linguists, teachers agree on the importance of using translation in foreign language classes. For instance, Schaffner (1998) claims that the translation and related exercises could be beneficial to foreign language learning:

1. To improve verbal agility.
2. To expand students' vocabulary in L2.
3. To develop their style.
4. To improve their understanding of how languages work.
5. To consolidate L2 structures for active use.
6. To monitor and improve the comprehension of L2.

Translation in foreign language classes is in the process of becoming a form of “pedagogical translation”, which is no longer viewed as an ineffective tool in language learning and is evaluated as a way to enrich learners' competences. Students taught by using pedagogical translation are encouraged to practice reading, writing, vocabulary, grammar, speaking. One of the main aims of foreign language teaching is to develop the student's ability to communicate in the target language. Researcher Ross (2000) states that translation is recognized as the fifth skill and the most important social skill since it promotes communication and understanding. As a form of communication, translation involves interaction and cooperation between people, which makes it a very useful tool in foreign language teaching.

Translation heightens language awareness. While translating students are focused on identifying differences in structure and vocabulary, they have to evolve strategies to deal with them and to negotiate the potential of both languages. The real usefulness of translation in foreign language classes lies in comparison of grammar, vocabulary, word order and other language points in the target language and the student's mother tongue. Students are directly exposed to contrasting language systems of the target and the native languages. Therefore, the learners should be required to discuss and correct common mistakes. It may be appropriate at this point to mention Perkins's (1985) observations:

*In order to develop in the students a linguistic awareness of contrast between L1 and L2 grammatical structures, and thus counteract interlingual interference, the teacher can quite legitimately get students to translate L1 sentences designed to pinpoint and clarify structures and patterns the student still has not assimilated.*

The material for translation should be interesting and varied, expressive and related to the learners' knowledge. As students should cover different aspects of the foreign language, the material is required to be authentic, diverse in terms of structure and function.

The teacher's task is to assess students' needs and select material to illustrate particular aspects of the language and

the structure which present difficulties for students in the English language. By working through these difficulties students are able to see the link between the language and its use.

According to Duff (1994), translation happens everywhere and all the time. The students translate in class for other students, interpret signs and notices in the environment, and translate instructions, letters for friends and relatives. Moreover, they mentally translate ideas from their mother tongue into English.

Translation might provide a guided practice in reading. Before starting translating a text it “should be read carefully and analyzed in detail to determine the contents in terms of what, how and why it is said” (Leonardi, 2009, p.143). Careful text analysis improves students reading comprehension and promotes vocabulary development. Translation can help students improve their writing skills because it is a transfer of a text from one language into another. Leonardi (2010) claims that a good translation should flow naturally, re-create both the style and the context of the original text, and follow target language conventions. As translation is regarded a communicative activity, it involves communication between the teacher and the student. Learners are encouraged “to discuss rights and wrongs as well as problems related to the translation task” (Leonardi, 2009, p.145). On the one hand, students are involved in a conversation on the translation topic, which helps them strengthen their speaking skills. On the other hand, students are requested to talk to both the teacher and other learners, and through listening to both the lecturer and the students improve their listening skills.

According to Leonardi (2011), translation as a pedagogical tool can be successfully employed at any level of proficiency, at school or University, as a valuable and creative teaching aid to support, integrate and further strengthen the four traditional language skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening. One of the possible ways to integrate translation in foreign language classes can be through the use of translation activities.

Researchers Nolasco and Arthur (1995) suggest that translation activities should meet the following criteria:

1. Language is used for a purpose.
2. Translation activities create a desire for communication.
3. Translation activities encourage students to be creative and contribute their ideas.
4. Students are focused on what they are saying, rather than how they are saying it.
5. Students work independently of the teacher.
6. Students determine what to say or write.

Moreover, translation activities need not be used in isolation, but should be included in an inherent part of the language learning course.

## Discussion and Results

At the beginning of the autumn 2011, translation activities were introduced into the English language learning at Kaunas University of Technology. The reason why translation

was introduced was the need to improve students' English language knowledge and to prepare them to pass language competence (level C1) examination, during which examinees are required to translate a short text. In order to assess the benefit of translation activities in the English classroom, a survey was carried out in the form of a questionnaire. The sample consisted of 78 third year students from the Faculty of Design and Technologies at KTU. The students had English classes 5 hours a week and their level of language was advanced. At the beginning of the course the participants of the survey were explained of the nature of their participation and after the course all the participants were asked to complete the questionnaires. Closed and open-ended questions were used in the questionnaire. The questions were mostly yes/ no and multiple choice ones, with the exception of a few open-ended questions where respondents had to answer in their own words (see Appendix). A few questions remained unanswered. The questionnaire return rate was good — all sheets were returned. The obtained data were analyzed and summed. The results of the students' survey are discussed below.

At the beginning of the course, translation activities were applied in the foreign language learning process to achieve progress in improving language skills in reading, writing, speaking and listening. According to researcher Duff (1994), properly designed translation activities can be employed to enhance the four skills and to develop three qualities essential to all language learning: accuracy, clarity and flexibility. The purpose of translation activities is not to train professional translators, but to help learners acquire and strengthen their knowledge in the English language. Integration with other activities takes various forms. On the one hand, translation activities are preceded by grammatical and lexical exercises to practice and improve certain difficulties that learners have. On the other hand, translation is a starting point for further oral practice.

Translation activities have to be well-prepared. First of all, an appropriate text should be selected, which can be an article from a newspaper or a magazine, or a technical text. The text to be translated must be interesting and relevant to the needs of the learner. While selecting the material, the potential for encouraging discussion is also very important. Translation texts should lead to discussion. Pair and group work is effective as they give students an opportunity to compare and discuss their ideas with others. In such a way, all students are equally involved in the task. Translation activities consist of pre-translation and post-translation exercises. Pre-translation activities are based on post-reading, grammar, vocabulary practical tasks. And post-translating activities are focused on rewarding, rewriting, revision and evaluating.

Distributing the text to students and telling to translate it is not a way to start a translation activity. Students should be instructed about the purpose of each assignment. The students have to know why the activity is done. Seeking to integrate translation and reading, first of all a discussion on the translation topic is initiated. Active words and terms are explained in English and then a list of key words which appear in the text in the learners' native language is handed

out. The students read the text in pairs and try to find English equivalents of the words written on the list. Then they compare results. They read, translate and analyze the most complicated parts of the text. After having read the text, the learners are asked to do comprehension exercises, such as answering questions, identifying true or false statements, forming general questions on the contents of the text. Finally, the students have to write a summary which is also a very important activity.

Another activity practiced in English classes is reading a short article from a magazine or a newspaper in Lithuanian, after which one student is asked to provide a summary of the article in English. Other students add details or produce their translations. It is noticed that alternative translations always generate students' interest and discussion.

Sometimes the text is handed to the students and they are asked to underline the words that they think could be omitted, simplified, or paraphrased in translation. The students are encouraged to work out a simplified translation and subsequently improve it by searching for more precise equivalents for the items that have been bypassed. Students are assigned to translate the same text using a bilingual dictionary. It is noticed that in many cases the original simplified translation turns out to be the best one. This exercise has demonstrated that over-reliance on the dictionary and too close translation can be dangerous.

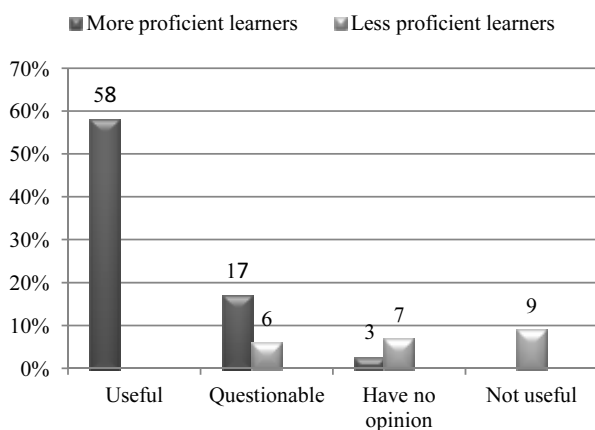
Correcting mistakes in translations is a challenging activity for students. Some incorrect word for word translations are handed out, and the students are encouraged to discuss and correct the mistakes. This can be done with common phrases. The activity at higher levels can focus on a specific aspect of grammar, for example, tense and time. This type of activity makes the learners concentrate on problematic areas and helps to notice the dangers of word for word translation.

As English computer classes are integrated into the language learning course, a number of activities that are beneficial for students' linguistic development are done once in a fortnight in computerized environment classrooms. The activities are usually based on tasks promoting students' knowledge in vocabulary, grammar, writing and reading. The most common activity is translation of articles. There are two elements to sound good in a foreign language. One is to know how to say a lot of things and the other is to avoid things you do not know how to say. Properly prepared translation assignments increase the number of things a student can say, set situations in which a student is forced to speak, and has to find or develop a way to express himself. While speaking, students are very good at avoiding situations in which they will need words, idioms or structures that they do not know. This is where translation comes in. The students are asked to choose short articles from the Internet and then they are encouraged to translate into Lithuanian. This presents even a challenge to the most advanced students because they suddenly need words, specialized terminology, idioms and collocations. At the same time, "by translating they acquire more competence in the knowledge of grammatical structures" (Petrocchi, 2006, p.3). Students are required to distinguish differences in translation from one language to another.

Back translation is another motivating type of translation activity which students enjoy. This activity is very effective when carefully prepared. Selected texts for re-translation should not be too long or too linguistically complex and not too distant from the learners' possibilities in English. Two short texts are prepared for translation from English into Lithuanian: text A and text B. The students work in pairs. In each pair one student gets text A and the other text B. Individually, each student translates the text into Lithuanian. Then in each pair the students swap the translations they have made. Again individually, each student translates the received Lithuanian text into English. Then in each pair the students show each other the original texts A and B. They compare their translations and discuss the differences between the two English versions of each text. This activity raises students' awareness of language transfer, the students are exposed to the differences between the two languages, they are encouraged to discuss and correct mistakes. This kind of activity gives learners further practice in grammar, vocabulary and even style.

All mentioned activities involve the translation of the text. This does not mean that the translation of sentences taken out of context is irrelevant to language learning. Translation of sentences can be used as a warm-up activity. It serves as an introduction to the material the students will be working on. According to Mahmoud (2006), translation may be useful because it can be interactive, learner-centered, it promotes the learner's autonomy, and uses authentic materials.

At the beginning of the term the students were not used to translation activities, but at the end of the semester most learners considered translation to be a useful learning tool. The majority of learners (78 %) were proficient in English and only 22 % of the respondents demonstrated lower level of proficiency in the English language.



**Chart 1.** The Students' Attitude Toward Translation Activities.

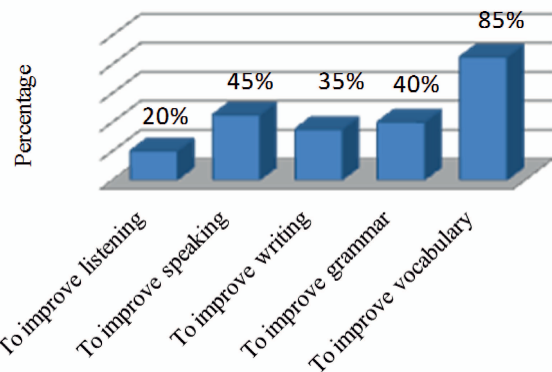
Viewing the results of the students' assessment of translation as a learning method, 58 % of the respondents considered translation to be a useful learning tool. 23 % of the students doubted about the usefulness of translation tasks. 9 % of the learners thought that translation could not help achieve progress in language learning and 10 % did not have an opinion. The results show that most students are quite positive about translation activities and the attitude

depends on the learners' proficiency in English. The responses of less proficient students indicate that translation is not suitable or useful for students of lower level of proficiency in English.

The respondents were also asked to give their opinions on the effects of using translation activities to learn English. The results show that more proficient learners perceive translation as being an effective language learning activity. Translation exercises were considered to be a positive learning recourse for them to comprehend, memorize, to acquire English skills, produce better English and develop interpersonal communication skills. As for less proficient learners, they perceived translation exercises as specialized, difficult and useless. Low linguistic ability of the learners doesn't help them see the value of translation activities.

While most students (question 3, see Appendix) perceived translation activities as being useful, only 39 % of the respondents found it enjoyable. 61 % didn't find them enjoyable but believed that translation was important in their current learning process.

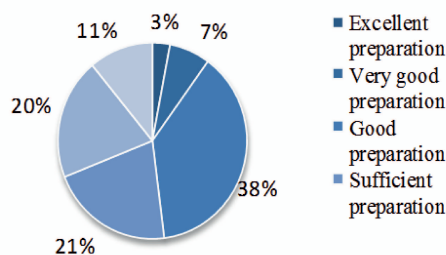
When asked whether they thought they could make faster progress through other teaching tools (question 4, see Appendix), 46 % of the respondents gave a negative answer and 54 % answered positively. Thus, over half of students believe that translation is an effective method to learn a language.



**Chart 2.** Areas Where Translation Activities are Considered to be Appropriate.

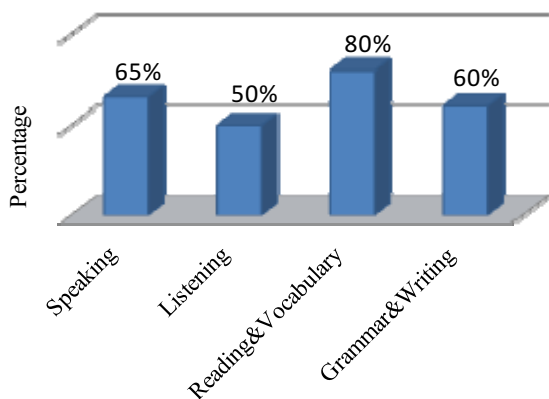
Viewing the data of the survey where the learners were given a list of areas of language and asked to tick them according to whether or not they thought translation activities would help them improve skills in each of those areas, 85 % of the respondents thought that translation was a beneficial tool to learn vocabulary. 45 % regarded this activity appropriate to improve speaking skills, 35 % preferred to use translation activities to improve their writing skills and 40 % of them thought that translation tasks could help improve grammar. Only 20 % of the respondents expressed their wish to use translation to improve their listening skills.

Question 6 (see Appendix) was included in the questionnaire in order to assess the students' preparation for the language competence examination. The research data reveals the difference in the degree of the learners' preparation for the examination.



**Chart 3.** The Degree of the Students' Preparation for the Examination.

Chart 3 indicates that translation activities offered excellent preparation for 3 % of the respondents. *Very good* was chosen by 7 % of the respondents, *Good* — by 38 % of the respondents, *Sufficiently* — by 21 % of the respondents. *Satisfactory* was chosen by 20 % of the respondents and 11 % of the learners mentioned that they had not prepared for the language competence examination at all. The results show that the majority of students believe that translation activities could help them prepare for the English language examination.



**Chart 4.** The Results of Students' Improved Skills.

Chart 4 shows the students' improved skills. 65 % of the respondents reported having developed speaking skills through translation activities. Listening skills were rated 50 %. Reading and vocabulary skills were rated best — 80 %. Grammar and writing constituted about 60 %. Hence, the results reveal students' progress in language learning.

Finally, when the respondents were asked to tick whether or not translation activities should be used in the language class room, 33 % gave a negative answer and 67 % answered positively. This means that translation is a useful learning tool and could be applied in the foreign language learning process. Most of the students gained the English language knowledge, developed skills in speaking, listening, reading, vocabulary, grammar and writing. Moreover, translation tasks taught the learners to work in groups and contributed to their preparation for the language competence examination.

## Conclusions

Translation as a method of language teaching is still a subject under research and continues to be one of the most frequently discussed topics among linguists, methodologists and teachers. However, the present study shows that translation activities are a useful pedagogical tool. When introduced purposefully and imaginatively into language learning programme, translation becomes a suitable language practice method for many students. When integrated into daily classroom activities translation can help students develop and improve reading, speaking, writing skills, grammar and vocabulary. Translation in foreign language classes enhances better understanding of structures of the two languages and also strengthens students' translation skills. It is an effective, valid tool in the foreign language learning and can be used in the university classroom to improve knowledge in English. Still, translation should not be overused and should be integrated into language teaching at the right time and with the right students.

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## Vertimas kaip metodas mokantis anglų kalbos

### Santrauka

Straipsnyje nagrinėjamas vertimo tinkamumas užsienio kalbai mokyti. Vertimas kaip mokymo metodas vis dar yra ginčytinas, tačiau per pastaruosius keletą dešimtmečių susidomėjimas vertimu, kaip vienu iš užsienio kalbos mokymo būdų, vis didėja. Naudoti vertimą mokant anglų kalbos skatina jo aiškumą ir tikslumą. Nors ilgą laiką vertimo metodas buvo ignoruojamas, tačiau pastaruoju metu atgimsta domėjimasis vertimu, kaip priemone skatinančia besimokančiuosius lavinti rašymą, kalbėjimą, supratimą iš klausos, teksto suvokimą. Vertimas padeda sugretinti anglų ir gimtosios kalbos ypatumus bei pasitarnauja aiškinant išskylančius sunkumus. Taigi tai yra naudingas ir efektyvus užsienio kalbos mokymosi metodas padedantis tobulinti besimokančiųjų kalbinius įgūdžius.

Straipsnyje analizuojami studentų vertinimai, kokius įgūdžius jiems padeda lavinti vertimo užduotys anglų kalbos užsiėmimuose. Tyrimas rodo, kad daugumai vertimas yra vertingas užsienio kalbos mokymosi būdas. Dar daugiau, gautų duomenų analizė atskleidžia, kad vertimo užduotys, integruotos į anglų kalbos mokymosi programą, skatina studentų kalbinių įgūdžių tobulėjimą. Taigi vertimas gali būti naudojamas greta naujausių metodų mokant užsienio kalbų ir yra kokybinis bei vertybinis šio proceso veiksnys.

Straipsnis įteiktas 2012 04  
Parengtas spaudai 2012 10

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## APPENDIX

### Questionnaire

1. How useful is translation as a means of learning English?
    - a) useful
    - b) questionable
    - c) not useful
    - d) have no opinion
  2. What are the effects of using translation activities to learn English?
  3. Do you enjoy translation activities?
    - a) Yes
    - b) No
  4. Do you think you could make faster progress in the foreign language learning through other means?
    - a) Yes
    - b) No
  5. What language skills do you feel can be strengthened the most from using translation?
    - a) reading and vocabulary
    - b) grammar
    - c) speaking
    - d) writing
    - e) listening
  6. Do you feel the translation activities have prepared you for the Level C1 language competence exam?
    - a) they have offered excellent preparation
    - b) they have offered good preparation
    - c) they have offered sufficient preparation
    - d) they have offered satisfactory preparation
    - e) they have not prepared at all
  7. Translation helped me improve:
    - a) speaking skills
    - b) listening skills
    - c) vocabulary and reading skills
    - d) grammar and writing skills
  8. Should translation activities be used in the language classroom? Why/ why not? .....
- a) Yes
  - b) No