EFL Learners' Use of Translation as a Learning Strategy

Emine Kuluşaklı
İstanbul Aydın University, Turkey

Emrah Boynukara[1]
Sakarya University, Turkey

Gülten Genç[2]
İnönü University, Turkey

Abstract

The purpose of the study was to explore whether learners use translation as a learning strategy in learning English. For this purpose, the research sought answers for the research questions investigating about the type of translation related strategies employed by Turkish EFL learners in learning English and the effects of some factors on the use of translation as a learning strategy. In reviewing the literature, it was seen that that language learners use some strategies in their foreign language learning process. Cognitive strategies were suggested to be one of language learning strategies that are mostly used by learners in improving their skills in the foreign language. In addition, it was also seen that, as one of the cognitive strategies, translation was used in learning a language by foreign language learners. Although some teachers and researchers present negative attitudes towards the use of this strategy in teaching a language, some put emphasis on the necessity and the role of translation in the development of learning. The researchers conducted a quantitative research with 159 students about the use of translation as a learning strategy. The participants were attending at a preparatory class in a state university and their ages ranged between 18 and 34. A questionnaire was comprised of some information concerning the students' gender and education background and translation strategy use. Data were statistically using SPSS package program and the results were presented in the tables. The findings showed that most of the learners use translation as a learning strategy and find it useful and important especially in thinking in their native language first and translate into the target language. Furthermore, it was seen that the learners with high proficiency level utilize translation as a learning strategy less than those with low proficiency level. Based on these findings of the study some recommendations were yielded.

Keywords: Translation, learning strategy, learning English, EFL learners

[1]Sakarya Üniversitesi, Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, Çeviribilim ABD, Yüksek Lisans Öğrencisi.
[2]İnönü University, Department of Foreign Language Education. Email: gulten.genc@inonu.edu.tr

Introduction

Translation is defined as "the process of translating words or texts from one language to another" (Oxford Dictionary) and as a learning strategy, it refers to "using the first language as a base for understanding and/or producing the second language (Chamot, 1987 cited in Tan, 2015, p. 56). It is generally accepted that good language learners use some language learning strategies in learning. Cognitive strategies as one of language learning strategies are mostly used by learners who study a foreign language. As one of the cognitive strategies, translation is usually preferred by foreign language learners. It is mostly known as a teaching tool used by those who support grammar-translation method which promotes translation. According to this method, the medium of the instruction in teaching is the native language of the learners so that the students can utilize their mother tongue to comprehend a reading text and plan before writing in the target language. Contrary to grammar-translation method, communicative language teaching approach asserts that thinking in the target language enhances proficiency of learners giving a minor role to the use of translation (Husain, 1995 as cited in Al-Musawi, 2014).As can be seen from the conflict between two teaching approaches, there has been always a debate whether translation can be beneficial or not in learning a language so far. Kerr (2016) summarizes the arguments that are against the use of first language in learning a foreign language as follows:

1. Translation is less important than the four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking, and, in any case, is not a useful skill for most learners to acquire.

2. Time spent using own language is time lost using English.

3. Learners need to learn to think in English and own-language use discourages them from doing so.

4. Own language use encourages the false belief that there is a word-forward equivalence between languages, and therefore leads to language interference problems. (cited in Kerr, 2016, p. 3)

In addition to these negative opinions on translation use above, Malmkjaer (1998) is also object to using translation as it is independent and unnatural (cited in Mehrabi, 2014). Similarly, Pan and Pan (2012, p. 4) assume that "translation involves the use of two languages and, thus, deprives students of opportunities to receive sufficient FL input" (cited in Fernandez-Guerra, 2014, p. 154).

In spite of these arguments aforementioned, many researchers give importance to the use of L1 as Scheffler (2013) states that reassessment of translation has been taken into consideration since the twenty-first century and also pays attention to the use of it as an

interesting and useful activity. Additionally, Cook (2010) and Liao (2006) put emphasis on the necessity and the facilitating role of the learners' mother tongue in the development of learning (cited in Karimian & Talebinejad, 2013, p. 606).   In a similar vein, Tan (2015) claims that "it is arbitrary to completely deny the positive effects of employing mother tongue to learn English" (p. 59). Rolin-Ianziti and Varshney (2008) and Lee (2012) acknowledge that many students having low level of English hold a positive attitude towards the use of their mother tongue (cited in Kerr, 2015). Moreover, Fernandez-Guerra (2014) find out that learners have "a very positive attitude towards translation and its potential" assuming that four language skills can be improved with the help of translation (pp. 166-167).For Mollaei, Taghinezhad and Sadighi (2017), translation is an important method for the following reasons:

1. It is useful to remove the psychological barriers learners may take to the learning environment;

2. It is helpful when teaching some complex grammatical structures unless the learners are proficient enough to cope with the L2 explanations;

3. It is a technique at hand in vocabulary practice when all the other practical techniques fail, for example for memorizing difficult words;

4. In a reading activity and when comprehension comes to a standstill (cultural-bound items) teachers are allowed to apply translation (p. 72).

A number of researchers studied on the effectiveness of translation strategy use among EFL learners. For this purpose, Karimian and Talebinejad (2013) explored the use of translation strategy by learners studying in Iran. 170 students studying English took part in the study. Learning Strategy Questionnaire, Interview Guide for students and Quick Placement Test were applied as data collection tools. The findings of the study indicated that translation strategy helped learners to learn English and the students trusted in the importance of it as a learning strategy. Additionally, Mutlu, Bayram and Demirbüken (2015) studied on the correlation between the proficiency level of Turkish students who studied English as a foreign language in preparatory classes of a university and the use of translation as a learning strategy.   The findings of the study revealed that the learners used translation strategy while writing and reading a passage in English in that they found it easier to think about how to complete a learning activity in their native language first and then translate into the target language. They felt themselves more confident when using this strategy. With regard to the relationship between the use of translation and the participants' proficiency, the learners with higher proficiency level used translation less than those with lower proficiency. Moreover, the

findings of the study conducted by Ramachandran and Rahimi (2004) indicated that translation could be used as a method in order to develop students' vocabulary. Accordingly, the use of translation provided learners to contrast and compare two different languages. Furthermore, students also utilize translation for vocabulary development and reading skills (Calis & Dikilitas, 2012). Dagiliene (2012) studied on the use of translation in the classroom activities to find out whether it helped students attending to a university to learn, improve and strengthen their competence and knowledge in English. The results of the study demonstrated that translation is a useful instrument that can be used to develop learners' language skills such as writing, speaking, vocabulary, grammar and reading.

The Significance of the Study and Research Questions

Whereas the use of translation as a learning method has been a debate by some educators and researchers in the domain of language teaching, the importance of it in learning is undeniable (Cook, 2010; Calis & Dikilitas, 2012; Karimian & Talebinejad, 2013; Liao, 2006; Mollaei, Taghinezhad & Sadighi, 2017;Ramachandran&Rahimi, 2004; Tan, 2015). Thus, this study aims at exploring the function of the use of translation as a learning strategy from the EFL learners' perceptions in Turkey. Considering the issues aforementioned in the literature above, this research attempted to find an answer to the following research questions:

1. What type of translation related strategies are employed by Turkish EFL learners in learning English?
2. Does use of translation as a learning strategy differ in terms of learners' proficiency level and their department?

Methodology

Participants

In order to understand whether learners use translation as a learning strategy in learning English, the study investigated learners' opinions about the use of it. The data for the study was obtained during 2018-2019 academic year. Totally 159 students attending to the School of Foreign Languages at a state university in Turkey participated in the study. The participants were informed verbally that their participation was completely voluntary and would not affect their grades in the courses. Of the students, 78 were female and 81 were male. The participants were attending at a preparatory class in a state university and their ages ranged between 18 and 34. The students were from the departments of English Language

Teaching, English Language and Literature, International Relations, Medicine, Molecular Biology and Genetics, Electrical and Electronics Engineering and Computer Engineering.

Instrument

In accordance with the purpose of the study, "Inventory for Translation as a Learning Strategy" questionnaire (ITLS) was conducted in Turkish in order to obtain the data. The questionnaire was comprised of some information concerning the students' demographic information as well. The questionnaire was originally developed by Liao (2006). The Inventory for Translation as a Learning Strategy is a four-point Likert scale comprised of 1 (never) to 4 (always) identifying how frequently the learners resorted to using translation as a learning strategy. For the current research, Cronbach's Alpha of the questionnaire was found as 0.77 which is thought to be satisfying since the minimum level was accepted to be 0.70 by Pallant (2005).

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, quantitative techniques were employed. Quantitative data analysis techniques involving descriptive statistics such as means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages were employed and the results were presented in the tables. To find out the means of use of translation as a strategy, the items with highest mean and percentage were presented and discussed. In addition, ANOVA was conducted to discover the effect of learners' proficiency level on their use of translation as learning strategy.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of the study were presented in two sections based on the research questions: The type of translation related strategies that are employed by Turkish EFL learners in learning English and the effects of proficiency level and the departments of the learners on the use of translation as a learning strategy.

1. What type of translation related strategies are employed by Turkish EFL learners in learning English?

The students rated the statements offered to them on a 4-point Likert Scale in order to find out how frequently they used translation as a strategy. The percentages, means and standard deviations of the responses were calculated in each area of the use of translation as a strategy and the results were presented in the Table 1. According to the table, learners

reported that seven most frequently used strategies are items 16, 4, 3, 11, 7, 9 and 14 out of 20 items received highest means (3.37, 3.27, 3.12, 3.06, 3.03, 3.03 and 3.01), while three items (8, 20 and 17) were reported to be the least utilized strategies with means of 1.98, 2.22 and 2.45.

Table 1

The Overall Means and Standard Deviations for ITLS

Items	N	Mean	SD
1. When reading difficult English text, I first translate it into Turkish in my mind to help me understand its meaning.	155	2.87	.87
2. After I read English articles, I use an available Turkish translation to check if my comprehension is correct.	154	2.73	.90
3. To write in English, I first brainstorm about the topic in Turkish.	155	3.12	.82
4. When I write in English, I first think in Turkish and then translate my ideas into English.	154	3.27	.82
5. I write Turkish drafts for my English compositions.	155	2.87	.97
6. When I listen to English, I first translate the English utterances into Turkish to help me understand the meanings.	154	2.57	.94
7. When I watch English TV or movies, I use Turkish subtitles to check my comprehension.	155	3.03	.88
8. I listen to or read Turkish news first in order to understand English radio/TV news better.	155	1.98	.94
9. When speaking English, I first think of what I want to say in Turkish and then translate it into English.	151	3.03	.86
10. If I forget certain English words or expressions in the middle of conversation, I translate from Turkish into English to help me keep the conversation going.	153	2.60	.86
11. I memorize the meaning of new English vocabulary words by remembering their Turkish translation.	153	3.06	.81
12. I use Turkish translation of grammatical terms such as parts of speech, tenses, and agreements to help me clarify the roles of the grammatical parts of English sentences.	154	2.62	0.86
13. I learn English idioms and phrases by reading their Turkish translation.	155	2.57	0.88
14. I use English-Turkish dictionaries to help myself learn English.	151	3.01	0.84
15. I use Turkish-English dictionaries to help myself learn English.	154	2.93	0.93
16. I use an electronic translation machine to help myself learn English.	154	3.37	0.74
17. If I do not understand something in English, I will ask other people to translate it into Turkish for me.	152	2.45	1.00
18. I ask questions about how a Turkish expression can be	155	2.72	0.96

translated into English.			
19. I practice mentally translating my thoughts from Turkish to English in various situations.	155	2.91	0.84
20. I take notes in Turkish in my English class.	155	2.22	1.01

It clearly seems from the table that learners mostly rely on the use of an electronic translation machine to help them in learning English. The learners also utilize various instruments to help them in translating. Among the tools such as electronic dictionaries, English-Turkish and Turkish-English dictionaries, 87.7 % of the learners report that (Item 16) they prefer using electronic machines to learn English vocabulary by themselves, 76.2 % of the students (Item 14) use English-Turkish dictionary while 68.9% (Item 15) use Turkish-English dictionary. Regarding writing in English, 85.8 % of the students (Item 4) think in their mother tongue, Turkish first and later prefer translating their opinions into the target language, English. This result interestingly indicates that learners heavily rely on their first language in their foreign language studies. Considering the definition of translation as a strategy suggested by Chamot (1987) as cited in Liao (2006) it could be thought that first language is the fundamental tool for the learners to construct meaning and build their own production in the foreign language. In a similar line, 75.5 % of them (Item 3) brainstorm about the writing topic in Turkish first before starting to write. This result reveals that learners prefer translation strategy in writing more than other skills such as reading, speaking and listening. This finding is in line with the results of the previous research conducted by Çalış and Dikilitaş (2012, p. 583) who suggested that Turkish EFL learners "tend to translate naturally" to understand in the classroom and in the skills such as writing and listening. In the literature, it is possible to find some other studies which reveal that even in dealing with speaking task learners' starting point is the first language and the production is translated into the second language in the mind as a second stage (Mutlu et. al., 2015; Ying, et. al., 2018).

Item 11 was asked to identify how the students learn vocabulary in English. It has also been seen that the learners often used translation in learning vocabulary, which supports Ramachandran and Rahimi (2004). This finding also supported Liao (2006) who acknowledges that translation is used by learners more often, especially, to learn phrases and words in English. As can be seen in the table, 77.8 % of the learners have reported that they memorize the meaning of new English words by remembering the Turkish translation. 74.8 % percent of them (item 7) use Turkish subtitles to check their comprehension while watching English TV or movies. It could be understood that learners are trying hard to understand the

utterances in the target language while watching TV or movies in the target language, English, in or out of the classroom and trying to enhance their own understanding.

In terms of using translation in speaking English, 72.8 % of the learners,(item 9) interestingly, explain that before saying what they want to say in English, they first need to think about that in Turkish.

Table 2

EFL Learners' responses about using translation as a strategy(The Highest Means for ITLS Items)

	ITEMS	Never	Rarely	Some times	Often	Always
16	I use an electronic translation machine to help myself learn English.	1.9	10.4	12.3	36.4	51.3
4	When I write in English, I first think in Turkish and then translate my ideas into English.	4.5	9.7	14.2	39.0	46.8
3	To write in English, I first brainstorm about the topic in Turkish.	1.9	22.6	24.5	36.8	38.7
11	I memorize the meaning of new English vocabulary words by remembering their Turkish translation.	3.9	18.3	22.2	45.1	32.7
7	When I watch English TV or movies, I use Turkish subtitles to check my comprehension.	5.8	19.4	25.2	40.0	34.8
9	When speaking English, I first think of what I want to say in Turkish and then translate it into English.	4.0	23.2	27.2	37.7	35.1
14	I use English- Turkish dictionaries to help myself learn English.	5.3	18.5	23.8	45.7	30.5

In contrast with the items (16, 4, 3, 11, 7, 9 and 14) above, items 8, 20 and 17 scored the lowest means around 1.90; these three items demonstrate that only 27.1 % of the learners (item 8) prefer to listen to news in either Turkish only or English only. Furthermore, the result indicates that 61.3 % of them (Item 20) rarely take notes in Turkish, in their English classes. The answers given to item 17 reveal that 45.4 % of the students do not prefer to ask other people to translate something that they do not understand in English into Turkish for them.

Table 3

EFL Learners' responses about using translation as a strategy (The Lowest Means for ITLS Items)

	ITEMS	Never	Rarely	Some times	Often	Always
8	I listen to or read Turkish news first in order to understand English radio/TV news better.	36.8	36.1	72.9	18.7	8.4
20	I take notes in Turkish in my English class.	29.0	32.3	61.3	25.8	12.9
17	If I do not understand something in English, I will ask other people to translate it into Turkish for me.	19.1	35.5	54.6	26.3	19.1

2. Does use of translation as a learning strategy differ in terms of learners' proficiency level and their departments?

The present study has also been intended to investigate the possible effects of different proficiency levels and the departments of the learners on their use of translation as a learning strategy. An Independent Samples T test has been conducted to see the relationship between the students' perceived success in learning English as a foreign language and their use of translation as a learning strategy. As can be seen in Table 4, the results of the analysis show that the relationship between their perceptions of success in learning language and use of translation is significant. As clearly can be seen from Table 5, the students who perceive themselves as unsuccessful seem to use translation as a learning strategy more often than those who express themselves as successful.

Table 4

Independent Samples T Test for the self-reported success and use of translation

GROUPS	N	%	MEAN	SD	t/F Value	P
Successful	87	63.5	2.73	0.39	2.32	**0.00***
Unsuccessful	45	33.3	2.92	0.32		

The relationship between the learners' proficiency level and use of translation has been the question of many previous studies and different results have been presented in the literature. Consistent with the result of the present study, in his research with Iranian EFL learners Husain (1995) reported that advanced level EFL learners did not prefer using

translation whereas beginner level learners firstly relied on their first language in their studies. However, based on the results of his research Titford (1985) claimed that translation was perceived as a problem-solving tool for the advanced level learners since advanced level learners were aware of the differences and similarities between the two languages. Thus, they get various benefits in using both languages at the same time consciously.

Table 5

ANOVA Results for the Departments and use of translation as a strategy

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	P
Between Groups	3.646	6	0.608	4.077	**0.00***
Within Groups	20.869	140	0.149		
Total	24.515	149			

The study has also revealed that there is a significant difference between the departments about the use of translation as a learning strategy. An analysis of variance demonstrates that the effect of department on translation as a learning strategy is significant, $F(6,140) = 4.077, p = .001$, as can be seen in Table 5.Therefore, there is a significant difference between departments according to translation as a learning strategy. Concerning the results of the study, the students from International Relations department (M=2.92) prefer translation as a strategy more than those from the English Language Teaching department (M=2.39). Furthermore, the students from the department of International Relations (M=2.92) and from Molecular Biology and Genetics (M=2.89) report that they use translation strategy more frequently than the students from the departments of English Language and literature (M=2.44). Accordingly, these results indicate that the learners with high proficiency level prefer translation less than those with low proficiency level (Rolin-Ianziti & Varshney, 2008; Lee, 2012 cited in Kerr, 2015).

The findings related to the two of the variables are consistent with each other. The proficiency levels of the learners from English Language Teaching (ELT) and English Language and literature(ELL) departments are higher than those of the learners from the departments of International Relations and Molecular Biology and Genetics. The learners of ELT and ELL who are also expected to have higher proficiency level do not use translation as frequently as the learners from the departments of International Relations and Molecular Biology and Genetics. In brief, proficiency level is a significant variable on using the native language and translation as a learning strategy in the process of foreign language learning.

Conclusion

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the use of translation as a learning strategy by EFL learners and explore whether the use of translation differs based on different proficiency levels in Turkey. It has been displayed that most of the learners use translation strategy and find it useful and important especially in thinking in their mother tongue first and translating their opinions as well as brainstorming in writing English to comprehend the text correctly. They also prefer it in speaking English. The study has indicated that EFL learners benefit from translation in many forms such as electronic, Turkish/ English or English/Turkish dictionaries to find meanings of the words. Moreover, they use translation to memorize vocabulary (Liao, 2006; Ramachandran & Rahimi, 2004). Nevertheless, the students do not use translation in listening to or reading Turkish news and in taking notes. Furthermore, the study has emphasizedthat the learners with high proficiency level utilize translation as a learning strategy less than those with low proficiency level (Mutlu, Bayram & Demirbüken, 2015).

As a final point, the results suggest that students with low proficiency level often resort to translation in their English classes thus making it an indispensable part in learning process of English. Moreover, translating from their own language to English or vice versa adds up to their ability to build up sentences in English with recurrent encounters and recalling of grammatical structures. In contrast to the common belief and approach eliminating and/or underestimating the supportive role of translation in learning language especially in the early years of language studies, with our present study proved to be of substantial instrument during language learning process predominantly regarding the learners' writing and reading skills (Çalıs & Dikilitas, 2012).

In conclusion, the findings of this study enhanced our understanding of the Turkish EFL learners' use of translation as a learning strategy which could be admitted as the most notable conclusion of the research. It could be obviously stated that despite the common belief that using translation in the foreign language teaching is out-dated or old-fashioned, it is still perceived as trustworthy friend by EFL learners especially for the low achievers (Rolin-Ianziti & Varshney, 2008; Lee, 2012 as cited in Kerr, 2015).

This study, however, is limited only in the preparatory class students of the school of foreign languages and certainly requires further investigation, involving a larger sample of participants or using different instruments, and also more complex research designs. In other words, for future research, similar studies about the use of translation as a strategy in learning

foreign languages are recommended with different subjects, instruments and with different variables.

References

Al-Musawi, N. M. (2014). Strategic Use of Translation in Learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) among Bahrain University Students. *Innovative Teaching, 3*(4). doi: 10.2466/10.03.IT.3.4

Bolitho, R. (2003). *Designing Textbooks for modern languages; The EFL experience*. Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies Good Practice Guide. Retrieved 18 October 2018, from http://www.llas.ac.uk/resources/gpg/1470.

Calis, E. &Dikilitas, K. (2012). The use of translation in EFL classes as L2 learning practice. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, *46*, 5079-5084.

Chamot, A. U. (1987).*Learner Strategies in Language Learning.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Cook, G. (2010). *Translation in language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dagilienė, I. (2012). Translation as a learning method in English language teaching. *Studies About Languages*, 21, 124-129. Available from http://dx.doi.org/10.5755/j01.sal.0.21.1469.

Fernández-Guerra, A. (2014). The Usefulness of Translation in Foreign Language Learning: Students' Attitudes. *International Journal of English Language & Translation Studies, 2*(1),153-170. Retrived from http://www.eltsjournal.org

Husain, K. (1995). Assessing the role of translation as a learning strategy in ESL. *International Journal of Translation,1*(2), 59-84.

Karimian, Z. & Talebinejad, M. R. (2013). Students' use of translation as a learning strategy inEFL classroom. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research, 4*(3), 605-610.

Liao, P. S. (2006). EFL learners' beliefs about strategy use of translation in English learning. *RELC Journal*, *37*(2), 191-215.

Malmkjaer, K. (1998). *Translation and Language Teaching*. Manchester: St Jerome.

Mehrabi, B, A. (2014). Pedagogical utility of translation in teaching reading comprehension to Iranian EFL learners. *International Journal of Language Learning and Applied Linguistics World*,*5*, 381-395.

Mollaei, F., Taghinezhad & A. Sadighi, F. (2017). Teachers and Learners' Perceptions of applying Translation as a Method, Strategy, or Technique in an Iranian EFL Setting. *International Journal of Education and Literacy Studies, 5*(2), 67-73.

Mutlu, R. A. G., Bayram, R. A. D. & Demirbüken, I. B. (2015). Translation as learning strategy of Turkish EFL learners. *International Journal on New Trends in Education and their Implications (IJONTE)*, *6*(2), 225-234.

Pallant, J. (2005) *SPSS survival manual. A step by step guide to data analysis using SPSS for windows* (version 12) (2nd Edition).New York: Open University Press.

Pan, Y. & Pan , Y. (2012). The Use of Translation in the EFL Classroom, *The Philippine ESL Journal,9*, 4-23.

Ramachandran, S. D. & Rahim, H. A. (2004). Meaning recall and retention: The impact of translation method on elementary level learners' vocabulary learning. *RELC Journal,35*(2), 161-178.

Scheffler, P. (2013). Learners' perceptions of grammar-translation as consciousness raising. *Language Awareness, 22*(3), 255-269. 10.1080/09658416.2012.703673.

Tan, S. (2015). The Relationship between English Language Proficiency and EFL Learners' Use of Translation Strategies. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and Translation*,*1*(4), 55-60.

Titford, C. (1985).Translation—a Post-communicative Activity for Advanced Learners. In C. Titford & A.E. Hiehe (Eds.), *Translation in Foreign Language Teaching and Testing* (pp. 73-86).

Ying, B. T., Hoon, A. L., Halim, H.A. & Majtanova, M. (2018). Students' Beliefs on Translation Strategy in Learning German Language. *GEMA Online® Journal of Language Studies, 18*(1), 69-86.