



DOES PEDAGOGIC TRANSLATION PROMOTE LINGUISTIC AND INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE?

Anwar Benmoqademⁱ,

Bani Koumachi

Ibn Tofail University,
Morocco

Abstract:

In today's world, globalized more than ever, intercultural understanding has become the bedrock of peaceful and successful communication across borders and a crucial element of language education. Translation activities naturally combine language ability and cultural awareness. This paper investigates whether Moroccan EFL teachers in the CPGE (Preparatory Classes for Engineering and Management Schools) believe that pedagogic translation fosters intercultural awareness among their students. To that end, this paper draws on both theoretical background and quantitative data collected from CPGE teachers. The review of literature provided in this paper provides theoretical evidence to believe that pedagogic translation enhances cultural understanding. However, the statistical data collected from the teachers does not consolidate those beliefs. This paper concludes that even though pedagogic translation has been advocated in major theoretical studies as a promoter of intercultural understanding, the results from the CPGE teachers in this study do not support that assumption.

Keywords: pedagogic translation, intercultural understanding, EFL, CPGE

1. Introduction

Language learning has always been infused with cultural awareness. In the same way, the debate over the liability of translation activities to promote foreign language learning raises inherent questions as to whether it can also foster intercultural understanding. This paper explores the possibility of translation activities to provide for both language learning and cultural understanding. To that effect, this paper collects data from EFL teachers in Morocco in the CPGE context. For those teachers, translation is a binding component of classroom activities and the national and international standardized tests they prepared their students for.

ⁱ Correspondence: email anwar.benmoqadem@gmail.com

2. Literature Review

Intercultural communication denotes exchanges between people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Beyond the language differences, people reflect various customs, standards, and perceptions. The success of intercultural communication hinges on mutual understanding between the different parties. According to House (2016), translation, in its endeavor to establish functional equivalence, is at the heart of intercultural communication. However, in translation, the source text (ST) provider and the target text (TT) receiver may not be co-present; but they should be in interpreting, in which case some direct interaction may occur. In translation as a form of communication, the translator has the possibility to translate at their own pace and to revisit their translation as they wish. On the other hand, the interpreter does not enjoy that benefit due to the immediacy of interpreting. Yet, beyond the formal context of interpreting, translation can be practiced as a form of mediation to establish communication between participants with different linguistic systems.

Another important aspect is that translation connects representatives of different cultures. The best display of that connection is to close the linguistic and cultural divide in communication. In this way, Ehrlich's (1984, p. 12) "diluted speech situation" is connotative of linguistic mediation. That is, each party in the communication situation adapts their texts so that they are transmitted and understood. Therefore, the ability of translation to stimulate thinking about functional equivalence makes it suitable for promoting intercultural communication (House, 2016).

That one does not translate languages but cultures is an example of the slogans that came up with the social and cultural shift in translation studies that marked the end of the 20th century (House, 2016). Similar to other branches of humanities and social sciences, translation studies embarked on the fashionable socio-politically oriented trends (Robinson, 1997; Venuti, 1995). The Prague school, the British contextualism, and the systemic-functional grammar schools afforded a contextual and sociolinguistic perspective on the translation of culture. According to those schools, language items are translatable only within the cultural context where they occur. Yet, they also view translation primarily as a linguistic activity (Cook, 2010). Thus, they divert from any view of translation as solely a culture-related activity.

Today, monolingual language teaching, as pioneered by native speakers, does not satisfy today's citizens' needs for cultural and linguistic skills that enable them to travel the world and set up complex bilateral relationships. The urgent need to communicate beyond the limits of languages and cultures has imposed a new shift in the perception of translation, and brought multilingualism into language instruction pedagogy. In other words, the shift in language education established an ideal atmosphere that affirms the validity of translation activities in the language classroom through the 'Integrating Plurilingual Approach' (IPA) (Gonzalez-Davies, 2017).

The IPA framework distinguishes between plurilingualism and multilingualism in language education. Plurilingualism implies that the language classroom incorporates and builds associations between different languages, and that those connections foster

language acquisition. Whereas multilingualism denotes that various cultures and languages coexist, however discretely, in the same education setting. Additionally, the IPA promotes the idea that brain connectivity is attained through prior knowledge of other languages. Therefore, the language classroom is a “*translingual environment*” (Anderson & Macleroy, 2017, p. 8) that reflects pedagogic decisions intended to capitalize on previous knowledge of language and culture within a plurilingual framework that encourages mediation skills.

In response to the interference hypothesis put forward by the direct method as an argument to ban the use of translation in language teaching, the IPA principles refer predominantly to Cummins’ (1991) interdependence hypothesis and common underlying proficiency model. In other words, no matter how different languages appear to be, they conceal features in syntax, lexis and morphology that indicate the existence of a shared knowledge that connects all of them. The same idea is reproduced in the 2001 version of the CEFRL, and maintained in the 2018 Companion Volume (Piccardo *et al.*, 2019) where we can read, “*Plurilinguals have a single, inter-related, repertoire that they combine with their general competences and various strategies in order to accomplish tasks*” (p. 9). In the same vein, Cummins (2008) posits that “*...translation has a role to play within a broadly defined communicative approach as a means of enabling students to [...] communicate in powerful and authentic ways with multiple audiences both in L1 and L2*” (p.56).

In fact, Cummins’ work on Basic Interactive Communication Skills (BICS) and Conversational Advanced Linguistic Procedures (CALP) (Cummins, 2017) is influential in understanding how and when the acquired knowledge in one language fosters the learning of another. In the same way, the Human Connectome Project and related work on language Connectome (2009) claims that learning a new language brings physical changes to the structure of the brain. That is done by shaping brand-new conceptions and joining them to previously installed ones related to languages learned previously. Similarly, the IPA focuses on student agency through trans-linguistic conceptualization whereby the student connects concepts in different languages (González-Davies, 2017). Those connections favor the employment of linguistic, paralinguistic, and multilingual texts in tasks that showcase purposeful use of plurilingualism.

Considering the on-going cultural dialogs, the need to associate various properties language and culture in communication motivated a sense of curiosity about translation in foreign language education. For instance, Puren (2002) develops a new language class conception; he says:

“...toute classe de langue constitue en tant que telle un certain cadre co-actionnel-co-culturel, puisque l’enseignant et les apprenants ont à y réaliser une action conjointe d’enseignement/apprentissage d’une langue-culture qu’ils ne pourront mener à bien ensemble que sur la base d’un minimum de conceptions communes. » (p. 10)

Those shared conceptions, according to Puren, make way for different forms of translation as outlined in the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Council of Europe [CoE], 2001) under the concept of mediation. In the CEFR, translation

in the language classroom can happen between languages (interlinguistic) as it is the case in translation proper and interpreting, or it can happen within the same language (intralinguistic) as it is in synthesis, paraphrase, and summary. Puren (1995) also posits that translation is especially helpful to those learners who find it difficult to comprehend target language input. As a result, he raises questions about the inconsistency of monolingual dogmas that highlight the supremacy of responding to the strategies of the learners, and the veto they exercise to prevent the learners from using L1 as their most direct strategy.

The concepts of plurilingualism and pluriculturalism move away from the usual L1/L2 dichotomy to accentuate bilingualism and plurilingualism as one entity. That is to say, there is no room for compartmentalized languages. Thus, the individual does not have a set of communicative competences relevant to each language they speak, but rather a multilingual and multicultural competence reflecting all the languages they know. According to the CEFR (CoE, 2001),

“Plurilingual and pluricultural competence refers to the ability to use languages for the purposes of communication and to take part in an intercultural interaction, where a person, viewed as a social agent, has proficiency of varying degrees, in several languages and experience of several cultures. This is not seen as the superposition or juxtaposition of distinct competences, but rather as the existence of a complex or even composite competence on which the user may draw.” (p. 168)

Therefore, in the CEFR, plurilingual and pluricultural competences reflect the diversity of a person’s repertoire. That language pool expands because of the person’s exposure to additional language experiences in different communicative situations (home, school, workplace, society, or the world at large). It, thus, provides the required tools to attain the status of social agency as targeted in the CEFR. That social agency is only possible through the strategic implementation of an unfragmented combination of the user’s plurilinguistic and pluricultural assets.

Focus on the pluricultural dimension does not mean that plurilingual and pluricultural competences should develop in uniformity. There is no link between the two competences. A language user may develop high proficiency in the language of a certain community, but poor knowledge of its culture, especially if that language is dominant (English, for instance). Such imbalances are entirely normal. Similar imbalances can be traced even within the same community where people live up to different (sub) cultures. Similarly, plurilingual competence is generally uneven as a learner may develop greater competence in one language than another. Nevertheless, the CEFR recognizes the complementarity between the individual’s general competence, communicative competence, and his/her functional competence in a particular domain. According to the CEFR (2001), plurilingual and pluricultural competence is *“a transitory profile and a changing configuration”* (p. 133), as opposed to monolingual competence, which is *“stabilized”*. In other words, plurilingual and pluricultural competence evolves

following “*the career path, family history, travel experience, reading and hobbies*” (p.133) of the user/ learner.

According to Coste and Cavalli (2018) plurilingualism and Pluriculturalism should no longer be the objective of the language learning process but the starting point of language use. They claim that in today’s world, students join language classes with enough experience and knowledge of at least one other language and culture. In other words, the language learner is a developing social agent with plurilinguistic and pluricultural repertoire. Therefore, the objective of language learning and teaching has shifted towards plurilingualism and pluriculturalism. In the same way, the utopian native speaker’s competence has been replaced by the pluricultural speaker’s competence. As for plurilinguistic competence, Kramsch and Whiteside (2008) claim that it entails the ability to translate, and to think critically about the social, cultural, and historical knowledge that is communicated through grammar and lexis. The ability to translate within the CEFR is operationalized through mediation, which will be discussed in the next section.

3. Material and Methods

The objective of this paper is to investigate whether translation activities promote linguistic and intercultural understanding within the EFL classroom. To that end, CPGE EFL teachers in Morocco were given a questionnaire in which they responded to different items regarding their use of translation activities for various objectives of their EFL classroom. One of them was about the validity of translation activities to promote intercultural understanding. The questionnaire was intended as a census since it was addressed to the entire population of CPGE EFL teachers in Morocco. Their total number was 67 at the time when the questionnaire was sent. Yet, only 36 of them responded. The data that came out of those questionnaire items was analyzed statistically using SPSS (v.26).

4. Results

Intercultural understanding has been increasingly acclaimed as a major objective of FL teaching and learning. Within that logic, the researcher wanted to investigate whether CPGE EFL teachers consider translation helpful in spreading a sense of intercultural understanding. Interestingly enough, the relationship between translation and intercultural understanding does not seem to receive clear-cut responses of agreement or disagreement from the respondents. Figure 1 summarizes the data obtained for that claim.

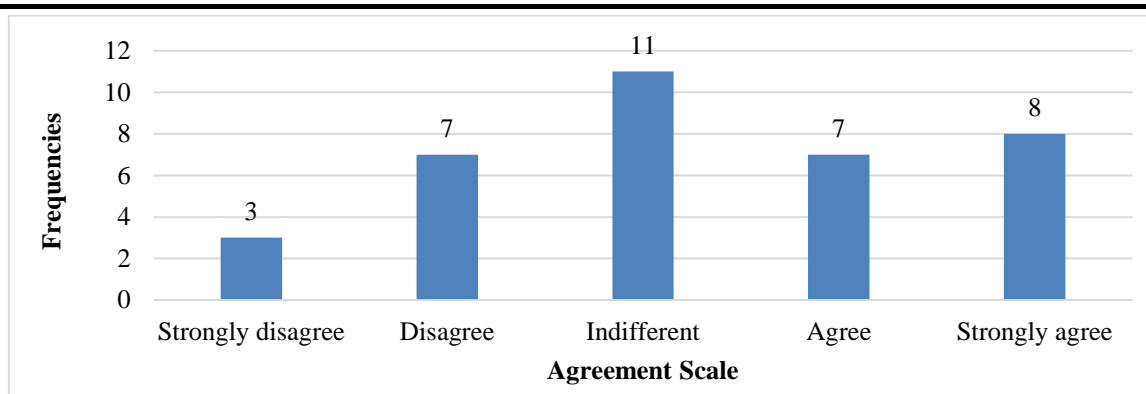


Figure 1: Translation Fosters Intercultural Understanding

The graphical representation in Figure 1 reveals that the biggest category of respondents felt indifferent to the related statement. That is, 11 respondents expressed indifference to the potential possibility of translation to enhance intercultural understanding. They represent the highest contributing portion, with a valid percentage of 30.6%. 7 respondents disagreed with this item, representing 19.4% of the responses collected for this item, and 3 said they strongly disagreed. Thus, the cumulative disagreement percentage rises to 27.7%. On the other hand, 7 respondents expressed their agreement, representing a rate of 19.4%, and an additional share of 8 respondents said they strongly agreed. Therefore, the cumulative percentage of agreement amounts to 41.6%. The mode for this dataset is at 3, and the median is at 3.28. The mode and the median values suggest that the 'indifferent' category has the highest number of responses. However, if we consider the cumulative percentage of agreement and disagreement, we notice that the agreement frequency is slightly higher (+14%). Though the difference in rates does not inspire confidence in an outspoken decision in favor of translation, it still gives enough evidence not to deny its potential as a gateway to discuss cultural differences and similarities.

4.1 Discussion of the Translation of Culture-specific Items

This item aims to investigate the frequency of the teachers' use of translation to generate discussions about similarities or differences between cultural concepts and ideas. The statistics for this item are recorded in Figure 2 below. As a follow-up to the previous one, this item is meant to investigate whether the respondents use translation to engage their classes in discussions about culturally appropriate equivalents or to discuss different cultural perspectives. This type of activity is not mandatory according to the official recommendation for teaching English in the CPGE. After all, it is more relevant to translation studies than language teaching. However, the assumption that such discussions should foster intercultural understanding is always valid.

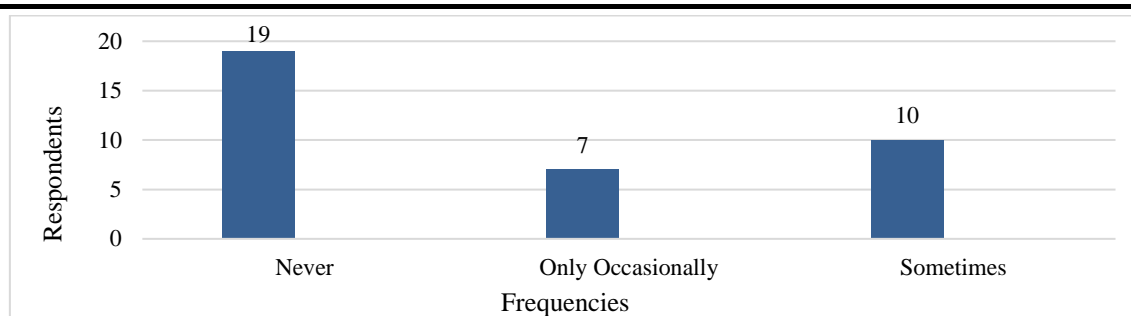


Figure 2: Discussion of Translation of Culture-specific Items

Looking at the statistics in Figure 2, it seems that the discussion of culture-specific ideas related to translation work does not appeal to the CPGE teachers. 19 respondents, representing the majority with 52.8%, said they never use translation in that particular sense. 10 of them, making up 27.8%, said they sometimes do, while 7 respondents, representing 19.4%, reported occasional use only. No 'Always' or 'Almost Always' responses were returned for this item. The mode for this dataset is at 1, and the median is at 1.65. The mode and the median values indicate that the 'Never' category has the highest frequency.

5. Discussion

Translation is not only a linguistic activity that requires the substitution of linguistic and syntactic features. It is also a means of communication and understanding across cultures. To translate a text, the language and the culture have to be considered. The intertwined relationship between language and culture makes it difficult to faithfully translate a SL text into the target language; language is a vehicle of culture, and culture is a means to understand language. Texts are infused with linguistic and cultural conventions that have to be decoded properly when rendering messages across linguistic and cultural norms. That idea is in line with House (2009), who calls for transferring the message in its linguistic and cultural context.

The research results for the discussion of culture-specific ideas, concepts, and collocations are quite surprising. In the CPGE, English teachers are concerned mostly with preparing their students to meet the needs of high-stakes written examinations. In those exams, the students are expected to render appropriate translations of source texts, which generally do not require an in-depth understanding of the subtle differences between cultural equivalents. However, the teachers' return to more positive reactions to that statement is a clear sign that translation for them is not just an exam component, but an EFL teaching activity in which there is genuine interest.

Feedback was also collected from the CPGE teachers concerning the ability of translation activities in the classroom to spread intercultural understanding. In that regard, the researcher finds it inconsistent that the respondents reflect a strong belief in translation to attain different language learning objectives, but express poor reactions to its ability to spread intercultural understanding. The literature review implies that translating between two different languages is, in essence, translating between two

different cultures, assuming that language is the bearer of cultural constructs. In this sense, the results do not corroborate House (2016), who states that translation motivates reflection upon cultural equivalence. In today's society, more fluid than ever before, the need to engage in interlinguistic and intercultural exchange is becoming increasingly important, and it has motivated new conceptual thinking about language learning. Indeed, such an idea alludes to Gonzalez-Davies (2020), who introduced the IPA in a way to ease the linguistic disparities that may exist in a multilingual environment and, subsequently, the inherent cultural mismatches that may arise.

However, the results show that strong agreement from the teachers in the questionnaire did not materialize for the ability of translation to foster intercultural understanding. About 42% of the valid responses were positive in that regard. Those results raise fundamental questions as to how feasible translation activities are to promote the transfer of messages across languages and cultures. They also raise questions as to the validity of the target text as a recast of the source text. The valid negative responses (27%) and the number of respondents (11/36) who did not return any feedback in this line of research add to the academic pertinence of those questions. Thus, to provide for the underlying research question, the results for this item suggest that translation activities in the classroom do not foster intercultural understanding between the languages involved, at least for CPGE Teachers in Morocco.

6. Conclusion

The debate over the validity of pedagogic translation to promote the learning of language and culture is still open. This paper explored the potential of translation activities in EFL teaching and learning to promote interlinguistic and intercultural understanding according to Moroccan teachers of English in the CPGE context. The results show that a definite answer cannot be generated since a sound body of evidence did not materialize in that way.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

About the Author(s)

Anwar Benmoqadem is an English Teacher at the CPGE (Classes Préparatoires Aux Grandes Écoles) in Marrakesh, Morocco. He is interested in Language Education, Special Education, English for Specific Purposes, and Curriculum Development.

Bani Koumachi is a Professor at the Department of English Studies, School of Languages, Humanities and Arts, Ibn Tofail University, Kenitra, Morocco. Among his interests are Teaching Methods, Teacher Education, Educational Technology, Secondary Education, Language Education, Special Education, and Cultural Studies.

References

- House, J. (2016). *Translation as communication across languages and cultures*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group. <https://doi.org/10.1556/084.2016.17.1.7>
- Ehlich, K. (1984). *Zum Textbegriff*. In A. Rothkegel & B. Sandig (Eds.), *Text, text types, semantics: Linguistic models and machine methods* (9-25). H. Buske. https://openlibrary.org/books/OL21984615M/Text_Textsorten_Semantik
- Cook, G. (2010). *Translation in language teaching: An argument for reassessment*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1473-4192.2010.00259.x>
- Robinson, D. (1997). *Translation and empire: Postcolonial theories explained*. St. Jerome. <https://doi.org/10.1075/target.11.2.19lia>
- Venuti, L. (1995). *The translator's invisibility: A history of translation*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.7202/037229ar>
- González-Davies, M. (2017). The use of translation in an integrated plurilingual approach to language learning: Teacher strategies and best practices. *Journal of Spanish Language Teaching*, 4(2), 124–135. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23247797.2017.1407168>
- Anderson, J., & Macleroy, V. (Eds.). (2017). *Multilingual digital storytelling: Engaging creatively and critically with literacy* (First issued in paperback). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315758220>
- Cummins, J. (1991). Interdependence of first- and second-language proficiency in bilingual children. In E. Bialystok (Ed.), *Language processing in bilingual children* (pp. 70–89). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511620652.006>
- Cummins, J. (2008). BICS and CALP: Empirical and theoretical status of the distinction. *Encyclopedia of language and education*, 2(2), 71-83. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-30424-3_36
- Piccardo, E., North, B., & Goodier, T. (2019). Broadening the scope of language education: mediation, plurilingualism, and collaborative learning: the CEFR companion volume. *Journal of E-Learning and Knowledge Society*, Vol 15 No 1 (2019): *Journal of E-Learning and Knowledge Society*. <https://doi.org/10.20368/1971-8829/1612>
- Cummins, J. (2017). BICS and CALP: Empirical and theoretical status of the distinction. In B. V. Street & S. May (Eds.), *Literacies and language education* (pp. 59–71). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-02252-9_6
- Puren, C. (2002). Perspectives actionnelles et perspectives culturelles en didactique des langues-cultures : Vers une perspective co-actionnelle co-culturelle. *Langues Modernes*, 3 (2002), 55–71. <https://www.aplv-languesmodernes.org/spip.php?article844>
- Puren, C. (1995). La problématique de la centration sur l'apprenant en contexte scolaire. *Études de Linguistique Appliquée*, 100, 129–149. <https://www.proquest.com/openview/9c5b4ffd6af5f6e7cff6003fe80a7610/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=1817816>
- Council of Europe. (2001). *Common European framework of reference for languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*. Council of Europe Publishing. <https://tinyurl.com/yckn84x6>

- Coste, D., & Cavalli, M. (2018). Retour sur un parcours autour de la médiation. *Recherches en didactique des langues et des cultures*, 15(2). <https://doi.org/10.4000/rdlc.2975>
- Kramsch, C., & Whiteside, A. (2008). Language ecology in multilingual settings. Towards a theory of symbolic competence. *Applied Linguistics*, 29(4), 645–671. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amn022>
- House, J. (2009). Subjectivity in English as lingua franca discourse: The case of *you know*. *Intercultural Pragmatics*, 6(2), 171-193. <https://doi.org/10.1515/iprg.2009.010>
- González-Davies, M. (2020). Developing mediation competence through translation. In *The Routledge handbook of translation and education* (pp. 430-450). Taylor & Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367854850-27>

Creative Commons licensing terms

Authors will retain the copyright of their published articles agreeing that a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0) terms will be applied to their work. Under the terms of this license, no permission is required from the author(s) or publisher for members of the community to copy, distribute, transmit or adapt the article content, providing a proper, prominent and unambiguous attribution to the authors in a manner that makes clear that the materials are being reused under permission of a Creative Commons License. Views, opinions, and conclusions expressed in this research article are views, opinions and conclusions of the author(s). Open Access Publishing Group and European Journal of English Language Teaching shall not be responsible or answerable for any loss, damage or liability caused in relation to/arising out of conflict of interests, copyright violations and inappropriate or inaccurate use of any kind content related or integrated on the research work. All the published works are meeting the Open Access Publishing requirements and can be freely accessed, shared, modified, distributed and used in educational, commercial and non-commercial purposes under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).