



THE ROLE OF PEDAGOGIC TRANSLATION IN GRAMMAR LEARNING: A TOOL FOR STRUCTURAL AWARENESS AND ACCURACY

Anwar Benmoqademⁱ,

Bani Koumachi

Ibn Tofail University,
Marrocco

Abstract:

Pedagogic translation has long been the issue of debate between critics who ostracize it in language teaching, presumably because of its connection to the grammar translation method on the one hand, and proponents of bilingual reforms in language education, on the other. The latter advocate that pedagogic translation is not without merits. Previous studies suggest that pedagogic translation promotes linguistic accuracy. This paper explores the role of pedagogic translation in developing the learners' understanding of grammar rules and sentence structure. This paper combines theoretical insights with statistical data collected from teachers and learners of English at the CPGE in Morocco. The findings suggest that pedagogic translation is an effective tool in learning EFL grammar.

Keywords: pedagogic translation, grammar learning, sentence structure, linguistic accuracy

1. Introduction

Grammar is an essential element of language competence that structures the body and content of language. Conventional grammar teaching has often depended on didactic monolingual approaches, which reflect explicit explanations of the rules followed by drills, often in mechanical and predictable patterns. Recent developments in language pedagogies have phased in bilingual methods that are inductive in nature and inclusive in perspective. One of the facets of bilingual approaches is the resurgence of translation in language education. Accordingly, language instruction and learning are reinforced by translation activities between the source language and the target language.

Historically, translation has been banned in language education ever since the downfall of the grammar translation method. With the rise of monolingual and

ⁱ Correspondence: email anwar.benmoqadem@gmail.com

communicative approaches, translation has been scorned as counterintuitive and detrimental. However, recent research has reopened the case of translation to explore its educational merits (Butzkamm & Caldwell, 2009; Cook, 2010; Malmkjær, 2018).

2. Review of the Literature

Throughout language teaching history, pedagogic translation has been associated with the grammar translation method (GTM), and abandoned because of that association. However, the GTM shaped language teaching practices throughout the 19th and 20th centuries when attitudes began to change. The rise of monolingual, immersive and communicative trends led to the dismissal of translation in mainstream language education, presumably because it was not suitable for developing communicative ability (Duff, 1989), useless (Carreres, 2006), unnatural (Sankey, 1991), and misleading (Malmkjær, 2010). To all of those, the GTM was characterized by explicit explanations of grammar constructs in total disregard of oral fluency (Larson-Freeman & Anderson, 2011).

Nonetheless, other scholars have advocated for the educational benefits of pedagogic translation. Cook (2010) provides an account of educational arguments in favor of pedagogic translation. In the same way, Butzkamm & Caldwell (2009) call a bilingual reform in language education in which translation is a fundamental classroom practice. Other scholars have made a case for other benefits of translation (Pym, 2013).

As regards the role of translation in the learning of grammar, the available literature supports that translation promotes structural awareness. In other words, translation practices highlight the differences that exist in word order, verb forms and tenses as well as syntactic norms. Similarly, Károly (2015) suggests that the use of translation activities for contrastive analysis helped Hungarian learners of English understand the differences in the use of tenses. In the same way, Laviosa (2014) concludes that translation exercises help learners correct grammar errors and sentence structure. Additionally, Malmkjær (2018) testifies to the validity of translation exercises to encourage metalinguistic reflection, which allows the learners to analyze and manipulate the grammar rules and syntactic structures they encounter.

However, critics of the liability of translation to promote grammar learning put forward that negative transfer may occur as a result of translation exercises. According to Oldin (1989), translation exercises may instil a false belief that the grammar rules in one language apply to another. Additionally, Malmkjær (2010) maintains that over-reliance on translation exercises may instil an erroneous conviction that there is a full one-to-one correspondence between languages. To respond to those critics, Cook (2010) recommends that translation activities should be framed within a communicative approach that provides context for both grammar and lexis.

3. Method

This paper aims to gauge the effectiveness of translation in the teaching and learning of grammar and sentence structure. The data that provides for that comes from Moroccan students (N=167) and teachers (N=36) of English at the Preparatory Classes for Engineering and Management Schools (CPGE). The participants responded to questions that investigated their perceptions of translation as a valid activity to teach and learn grammar and sentence structure. Their responses were analysed quantitatively using SPSS. The results that have been teased out consolidate what is documented in the literature review regarding translation as a valid language teaching and learning tool. This paper should be read as evidence in favor of pedagogic translation within the ongoing debate over its pedagogic validity in language education.

4. Results

4.1 The Teachers' Results

a. Translation Helps with Grammar Understanding

That claim is central to the debate about pedagogic translation. It is an argument in favor of translation in language instruction. Grammar understanding is an essential component of language proficiency. The researcher's assumption is that translation helps in that regard. Thus, the respondents' reactions to this item should provide evidence of the pedagogic validity of translation or its inefficiency. Figure 1 displays the data collected for that claim. It is worth noting here that no disagreement was recorded for this statement.

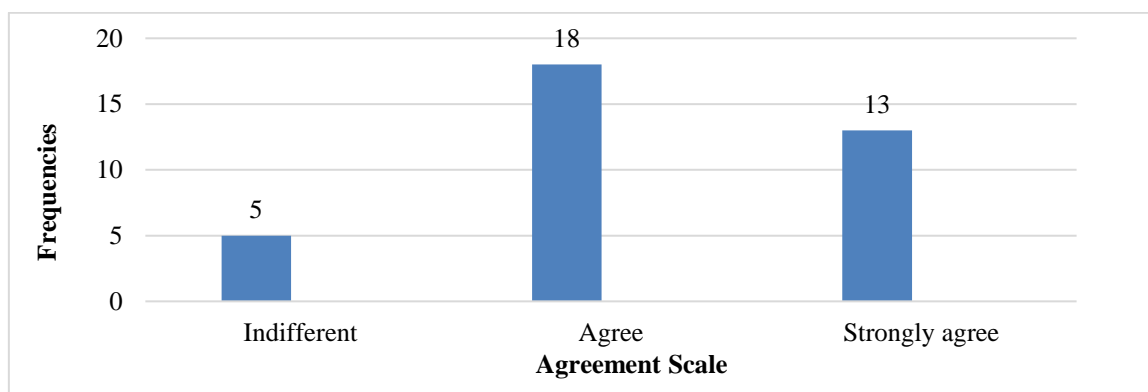


Figure 1: Translation Helps with Grammar Understanding

The statistical data in Figure 1 show that the vast majority of respondents confirm that translation helps with grammar understanding. In the same way, eighteen respondents expressed their agreement, representing 50% of the responses received for this item. Thirteen respondents expressed their strong agreement, representing 36.1%. Thus, the cumulative percentage of positive reactions represents 86.1 % of all recorded reactions. Five indifferent responses were also recorded, representing a percentage of

13.9%. The mode for this dataset is at 4, and the median is at 4.26. The mode and the median values indicate that the majority of responses are clustered around the agreement categories.

b. Translation Helps Understand Sentence Structure

This statement reformulates another claim that has been discussed in the literature review. To the researcher, this claim is a crucial one that needs consolidation from the respondents. In the available literature, translation is believed to stimulate conscious noticing of sentence structure. Theoretically, conscious learning is utterly nullified in monolingual methodologies as embodied by the Direct method and operationalized by Krashen's comprehensible input theory. Figure 2 synthesizes the data collected for that claim.

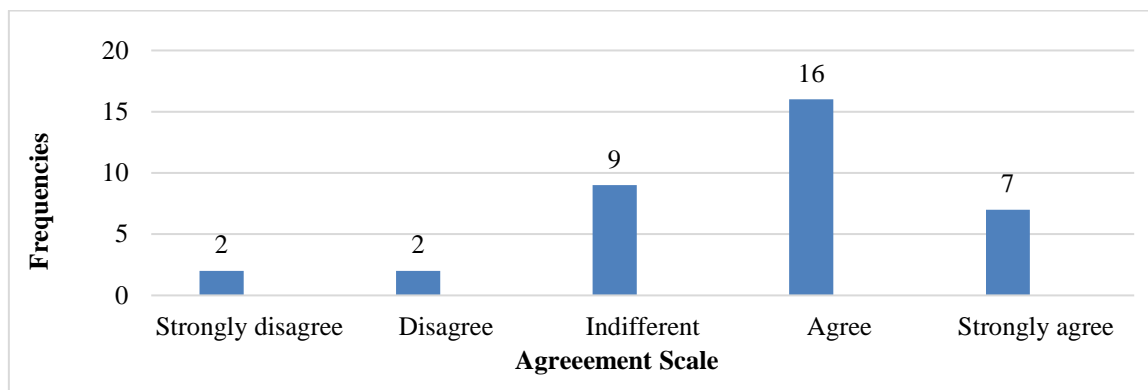


Figure 2: Translation Promotes Understanding of Sentence Structure

Again, almost half of the respondents look favorably on translation in its ability to promote understanding of sentence structure. That is, 16 respondents said they agreed, representing 44.4% of the received responses. 7 respondents expressed strong agreement, representing 19.4%. Thus, the cumulative percentage of agreement with that statement amounts to 63.8 %. On the other hand, the cumulative percentage of disagreement is 11.1 %, with 2 respondents expressing disagreement and another two expressing strong disagreement. 9 respondents felt indifferent, representing 25% of the responses collected concerning the relationship between translation and sentence structure understanding. The mode for this dataset is at 4, and the median is at 3.76. The mode and the median values reflect that the 'Agree' category has the highest frequency.

4.2 The Learners' Results

a. I Explain Grammar to Myself in Another Language

This item is meant to investigate whether the learners in the sample for this study use translation to understand grammar rules. The data collected for this item indicate that for the majority of the respondents, it is not a common practice. Still, some respondents reacted positively. Those reactions vary from being regular to very occasional. Figure 3

summarizes the distribution of the frequencies for the use of translation to understand grammar rules.

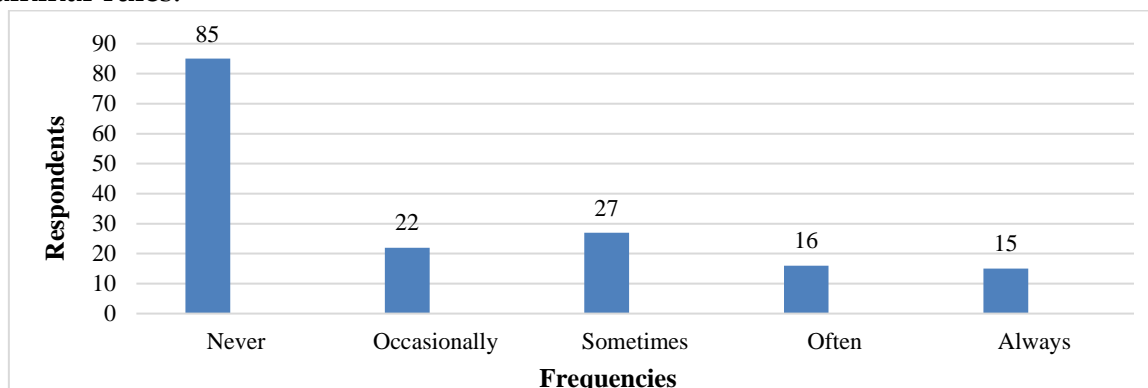


Figure 3: Translating Grammar Rules

All the respondents reacted to this item. The biggest share of responses is not in favor of using translation to understand grammar rules, with a valid percent of 50.9% (n=85). The rate of respondents who said they always use translation to understand grammar rules does not go beyond 9% (n=15). The median for the valid responses is at 0.00, and the mode is at 1. The mean and the median values suggest that there is a central tendency towards the 'Never' category.

b. I Translate Grammar Terms to Understand Their Functions

Statistics for this item consolidate the assumption in the previous item. In other words, learners need translation primarily to understand grammar constructs and their functions, which in turn helps them gain an understanding of the rules. Figure 4 summarizes the data for this item.

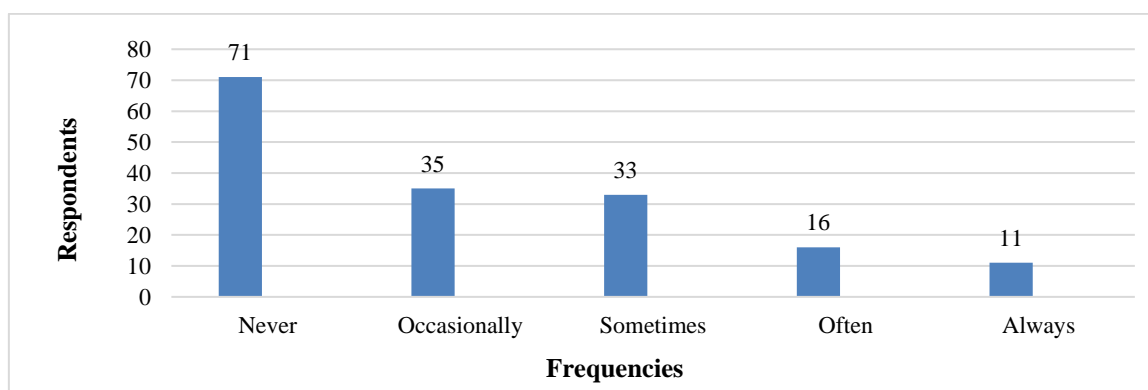


Figure 4: Translating Grammar Terms

Data for this item reflect the same trend as in the previous one. The responses in the 'Never' category represent 42.5%, coming from 71 respondents, while the responses in the 'Always' category represent 6.6%, coming from 11 respondents. Other respondents said they occasionally use translation in that regard, with a valid percentage of 21% from 35 respondents. Another 33 said they sometimes do, with a valid percentage of 19.8%. 16

respondents said they often resort to translation of grammar terms, which accounts for a rate of 9.6%. The median is at 1.00, and the mode is at 1. The mode and the median values suggest that there is a central tendency towards the 'Never' category. However, the cumulative number of respondents in other categories shows that more than half of the respondents reacted positively, though to different degrees.

c. I Translate to Compare and Contrast English to Other Languages

Data for this item is meant to gauge the respondents' use of translation to figure out similarities and differences between English and other languages they know in terms of similarities and differences. Figure 5 summarizes the data collected for this item.

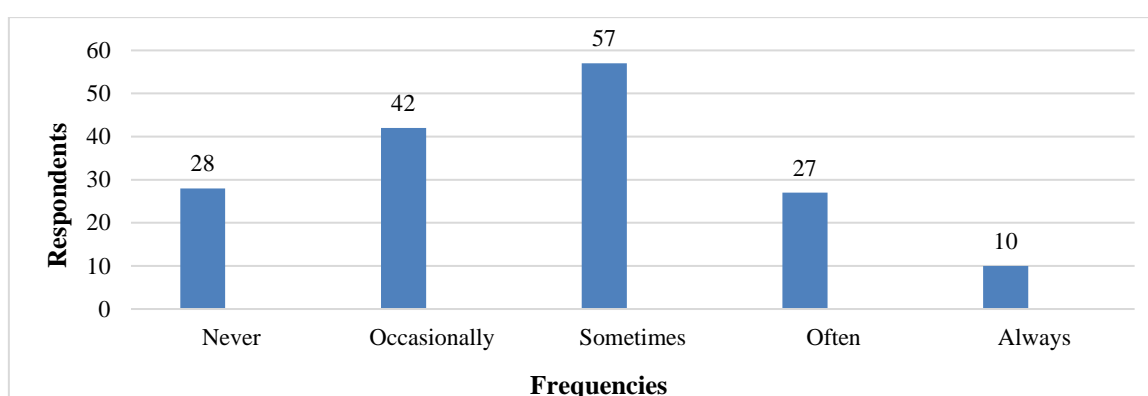


Figure 5: Use of Translation to Compare Between Languages

When asked whether they use translation to find similarities and differences between languages, 164 learners responded to that item. Among those, 16.8%, coming from 28 respondents, said they never use translation to compare and contrast languages. 42 respondents, representing 25%, said they occasionally do. Yet, the highest percentage is recorded by those who said they sometimes engage in translation work to find out similarities and differences between the language(s) they know and the one(s) they are learning. Another portion of the respondents said they often do that. A valid percentage of 6%, coming from ten respondents, confirmed they always engage in translation to compare and contrast languages. Therefore, the cumulative percentage indicates that 82.9% reacted positively to this item, though in different frequencies. The median for the valid responses is at 2.00, and the mode is at 3. The mode and the median values suggest that there is a central tendency towards the 'Sometimes' category.

5. Discussion

The results of this study confirm the relationship between translation and the learning of grammar. The discussion combines the results obtained from the teachers' questionnaire with the outcomes of the learners' questionnaire. Another argument in favor of translation is that it helps with grammar understanding. The research results for that statement support what is recorded in the literature about the validity of translation

activities to highlight the grammatical contrast between languages. Contrastive analysis helps to anticipate problem areas in the process of learning another language, which is in line with Lado (1957). The results also support Fisiack (1981), who maintains that translation helps to understand the contrast between tenses and subject-verb agreement. In the same way, they confirm Leonardi (2010), who maintains that translation is a form of conscious learning that helps learners clarify syntactic issues across different competence levels. In other words, it enables beginners to overcome basic syntactic issues and advanced learners to deal with more elaborate syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic complexities. In addition, the results of this research consolidate Butzkamm (2003), who testifies that translation can activate the universal grammar that lies in all learners. In the same vein, the results also corroborate Gabryś-Barker (2005), who states that translation is a way to enhance grammatical awareness and avoid negative transfer. After all, Smentek (2017) capitalizes on the use of translation to elicit and correct errors in grammar and vocabulary. Triangulation of the results of the teachers' and the learners' questionnaires confirms that translation helps in the acquisition of the target language grammar.

Concerning the argument that postulates that translation fosters sentence structure, the results of this research go hand in hand with the merits of translation that are mentioned in the review of the literature. Translation provides opportunities for incidental comments on the forms and structures of language. It is also instrumental in activating the learners' conscious noticing of the structural similarities and differences between languages. In theory, repetitive translation practice should help the emergence of an abstract sentence pattern. The results also provide further consolidation to Brown's (1994) the idea that translation fosters the positive effects of transfer, especially between similar languages. That idea, in turn, leads to independence in L2, which is in line with Tudor (1987). Even when transfer errors occur, that is still a sign of approximating a better use of the target language, as Corder (1975) contends.

The results obtained from the learners' questionnaire pertain to three items related to the use of translation to understand grammar rules. It seems that when it comes to translating the explanation of grammar rules into another language, the majority of learners do not favor the use of translation. One assumption is that once the grammar constructs are easy to understand, rules can be acquired through noticing and drills. However, statistical results show that several respondents said they always translate the grammar rules. In this case, the assumption is that there is the total absence of the basic constructs on which full understanding of the rules builds up. That is a problem that is beyond the scope of translation alone, as it requires remedial work, maybe in the first or mother language.

However, when asked about translating grammar terms into Arabic or French, most of the learners responded positively. The assumption made is that learners understand the target language's grammar terms by comparing them with their equivalents in other languages they know. This process of comparative analysis is strategic and inevitable. After all, learners translate silently as they resort to the

language(s) they know better to find the immediate solution to meet the new language challenges. The learners' use of translation to understand grammar is equally important in the sense that it gives deeper insights into the cognitive aspects of the language learning process. In other words, learners use translation to compare languages. In that way, they develop knowledge about metalanguage. In other words, learners engage in a cognitive process of association whereby they use the familiar language to accommodate the new one. This might apply to vocabulary, grammar, or any other syntactical or morpho-syntactical features of the language.

In general, the results regarding the impact of translation on grammar learning reflect that the teachers appreciate the use of translation to teach grammar and sentence structure, though to a lower degree. However, while most learners prefer to use translation to facilitate grammar understanding, a number of them reported a preference for learning grammar without translation. In line with the underlying research question in this study, there is evidence that the use of translation in the learning of grammar brings more benefits than interference, as is commonly held. The assistance from another language that the learners know better fosters the acquisition of the grammatical and syntactic forms of the target language. In addition, translation activities can also be used to promote inductive learning of grammar and sentence structure. In other words, translation work brings about indirect observations of the differences between the grammar rules of the source and target languages. Translation is also a problem-solving activity in which the learners engage with their full potential. Thus, some learning happens along the way through conscious or incidental noticing of subtle similarities and differences between languages. After all, repeated translation work consolidates the retention of grammar and syntactic features of the target language.

Admittedly, translation is a complex endeavor. Less proficient learners may not find it feasible to learn grammar rules through translation. They need other ways of instruction because they encounter multiple language challenges that they should overcome with vocabulary and grammar. Such sub-skills make translation activities difficult for less competent learners. In similar cases, low-level translation activities like scaffolding can turn those challenges into learning opportunities.

6. Conclusion

Pedagogic translation has often been banned in language teaching and learning, but it is a valid tool in grammar instruction. By promoting understanding of grammar and relevant terms next to sentence structure on the one hand, and promoting comparison and contrast between English and other languages on the other, translation enhances the learners' competence and the teachers' effectiveness. Nonetheless, over-reliance on translation can generate a feeling of frustration. Therefore, translation activities need to be conceived within a holistic approach that combines the virtues of bilingual methodologies and the merits of communicative practices. Future research may investigate how the inclusion of digital technologies in translation may speed up or

enhance understanding and long retention of grammar, vocabulary or any other language component.

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

- Brown, A. L. (1994). The advancement of learning. *Educational Researcher*, 23(8), 4–12. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189x023008004>
- Butzkamm, W. (2003). Grammar in action: The case for bilingual pattern drills. *Wholeheartedly English: A Life of Learning. Festschrift for Johannes-Peter Timm* (pp. 163–175). Cornelsen. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/270821159_Grammar_in_action_-_The_case_for_bilingual_pattern_drills
- Butzkamm, W., & Caldwell, J. A. W. (2009). *The bilingual reform: A paradigm shift in foreign language teaching*. Narr. <https://doi.org/10.37307/j.2198-2430.2013.04.08>
- Carreres, A. (2006). Strange bedfellows: Translation and language teaching. *Translation Studies in the New Millennium*, 4(1), 1-20. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/255171576_Strange_Bedfellows_Translation_and_Language_Teaching_The_Teaching_of_Translation_into_L2_in_Modern_Languages_Degrees_Uses_and_Limitations
- 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>
- Corder, S. P. (1975). Error analysis, interlanguage and second language acquisition. *Language Teaching*, 8(4), 201–218. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0261444800002822>
- Duff, Alan (1998). *Translation*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1075/target.1.2.13jon>
- Fisiak, J. (1981). Contrastive linguistics and the language teacher. Pergamon. <https://doi.org/10.3138/cmlr.38.4.717>

- Gabrys-Barker, D. (2005). Aspects of multilingual storage, processing and retrieval. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14790718.2013.786592>
- Károly, K. (2015). Translation in foreign language teaching: A cognitive-pragmatic perspective. *Journal of Second Language Translation Studies*, 3(2), 112-130.
- Lado, R. (1957). *Linguistics across cultures: Applied linguistics for language teachers*. University of Michigan Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/335383>
- Larsen-Freeman, D., & Anderson, M. (2011). *Techniques and principles in language teaching* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press. Retrieved from <https://acasearch.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/techniques-in-language-teaching.pdf>
- Laviosa, S. (2014). Translation and language education: Pedagogic approaches explored. *Language & Intercultural Communication*, 14(4), 423-437. Retrieved from https://www.routledge.com/Translation-and-Language-Education-Pedagogic-Approaches-Explored/Laviosa/p/book/9781138789890?srsId=AfmBOoQUODUcPyFNjn_VmqFfZiipTCcU0BbakYFwOTYX6aq7VoHFk0II
- Leonardi, V. (2010). *The role of pedagogical translation in second language acquisition: From theory to practice*. Peter Lang. <https://doi.org/10.1515/les.2011.024>
- Malmkjær, K. (2010). Language learning and translation. *Handbook of translation studies*, 1, 185-190. <https://doi.org/10.1075/hts.1.lan1>
- Malmkjær, K. (2018). *Translation and language learning: The role of translation in the teaching of languages in the European Union*. Routledge. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2782/13783>
- Pym, A. (2013). Translation as an instrument for multilingual democracy. *Critical Multilingualism Studies*, 1(2), 78-95. Retrieved from <https://journals.librarypublishing.arizona.edu/cms/article/id/6705/>
- Odlin, T. (1989). *Language transfer: Cross-linguistic influence in language learning*. Cambridge University Press. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139524537>
- Sankey, H. (1991). Incommensurability, translation and understanding. *The Philosophical Quarterly* (1950-), 41(165), 414-426. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2220077>
- Smentek, M. (2017). *Exploring translation in language learning*. Peter Lang Publishing Group. <https://doi.org/10.3726/978-3-653-03091-4>
- Tudor, I. (1987). Using translation in ESP. *ELT Journal*, 41(4), 268-273. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/41.4.268>

Creative Commons licensing terms

Author(s) 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 Foreign Language Teaching shall not be responsible or answerable for any loss, damage, or liability caused in relation to/arising out of conflicts of interest, copyright violations, and inappropriate or inaccurate use of any kind content related or integrated into 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/).