



**THE EFFECTS OF TRANSLATION IN TEACHING ESP
MEDICAL READING FOR IN-SERVICE STUDENTS AT CAN THO
UNIVERSITY OF MEDICINE AND PHARMACY, VIETNAM**

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Abstract:

English for special purposes (ESP) medical English has been offered as a course at Can Tho University of Medicine and Pharmacy (CTUMP), Can Tho City, for several years. Until now, to most of the in-service students, reading in medical English poses a significant challenge due to their proficiency level in English and limited knowledge of vocabulary. They struggle to absorb the medical texts, especially medical terms properly, discouraging them from engaging with medical English documents. There has been a renewed interest in using translation (English-Vietnamese) in medical English classes to support learners. Therefore, the objectives of this paper are to examine the difficulties faced by weaker students in learning medical English and to explore their perceptions of teachers using translation in teaching ESP medical reading. The study also investigates the importance of translation as a pedagogical tool in motivating weak in-service students to learn reading and comprehend terminologies and texts. The research results were computed by employing the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. The findings revealed weak in-service students' significant problems, their positive attitudes towards translation as well as their pedagogical role in ESP medical English classes.

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Keywords: translation, ESP medical classes, in-service students, English reading skills, Can Tho University of Medicine and Pharmacy

1. Introduction

For years, we, teachers of English at CTUMP, have restricted the use of the mother tongue (L1) in the classroom. However, in ESP classes, with this teaching method, in-service CTUMP students encounter significant challenges in understanding ESP medical texts due to their limited proficiency in English. We observe and realize that students must rely on translation to understand all the English medical texts provided, which appears to be advantageous for them. Clearly, translation has remained a useful tool, highly deemed as a remedy for learners' problems.

On the basis of this matter, the paper attempts to examine students' difficulties in ESP medical classes, and their perception of the use of translation and highlight its effectiveness in teaching ESP medical reading to facilitate and promote the learning of weaker students.

2. Literature review

2.1. The importance of the use of mother tongue in language classrooms

It is necessary to discriminate between the use of the mother tongue as a means aimed at training professional translators and the use of the mother tongue as a means to help learners acquire, develop, and further strengthen their knowledge and competence in a foreign language (Leonardi, 2010). In our teaching and research situation, the mother tongue is not taught as a vocational skill. It is just an aid to language learning.

According to Al-Musawi (2014), the use of the mother tongue can facilitate the communication process by interpreting the information received in one language into another language, and vice versa. Having the same idea, many researchers stated that the use of the mother tongue in classes allows a better understanding of language structures (Leonardi, 2011), and develops three qualities essential to all language learning: accuracy, clarity, and flexibility (Ross, 2000), promoting a deeper understanding of the form and content of the source language text, increases learners' awareness of the differences between both linguistic systems, allows them to re-express their thoughts faster and easier, and helps them acquire cultural knowledge (Fernández-Guerra, 2014).

In addition, the use of both students' mother tongue and code-switching between two languages is naturally beneficial in learning a new language (Harmer, 2001). In fact, it is impossible to keep L1 and L2 apart because "*the L1-L2 connection is an indisputable fact of life; whether we like it or not, the new knowledge is learned on the basis of the previously acquired language*" (Stern, H.H., 1992).

Using the students' native language (L1) in the classroom serves to create a positive emotional atmosphere. Translation can help reduce anxiety associated with learning and enhance motivation to learn the second language (L2) (Liao, P., 2006). Schweers (1999) advocated for incorporating the native language into lessons to influence the classroom

dynamic, provide a sense of security, and validate the learners' experiences. Another study conducted by Bonyadi (2003) concluded that engaging in translation activities within classrooms fosters better interaction between teachers and students, as well as among the students themselves.

2.2. The use of mother tongue, a useful tool, for teaching reading in ESP classes for weak students

Numerous studies have highlighted the benefits of utilizing the native language, especially for lower-level students, to enhance their reading comprehension in ESP classes. J. Harmer (2001:131) noted that the use of the L1 is essential during activities when students lack the linguistic capability to access the vocabulary required for a specific task. In 2002, Mahmoud discovered that translation can significantly improve comprehension by encouraging students to carefully and precisely analyze a passage at the word, sentence, and overall text levels. Liao's research in 2006 reported that most students utilize their mother tongue to enrich their English vocabulary, grasp sentence structures, and comprehend expressions, thus enhancing their reading abilities. Rushwan (2017) supported this perspective, emphasizing that translation aids in developing students' reading comprehension skills, serving as a conscious learning process.

It's important to note that in the teaching and learning of ESP, learners often seek to verify the precise meanings of professional terms in their native language, either through consulting bilingual dictionaries or seeking explanations from their teachers. Regardless of their proficiency in comprehending authentic reading or listening materials, the majority of students tend to mentally translate between their second language (L2) and their native language (L1) (Kavaliauskienė & Kaminskiene, 2007). A study conducted by Çelik and Topkaya (2016) highly appreciated the use of translation as an effective methodology in ESP reading skill courses.

Considering the aforementioned points, leveraging the mother tongue can be deemed a valuable pedagogical tool for enhancing reading comprehension in ESP classes

3. Research methodology

The research tried to cover the following issues.

3.1. Research questions

- 1) What are the problems that in-service ESP medical learners encounter in reading comprehension?
- 2) What are in-service medical students' perceptions towards the use of their mother tongue in their ESP classes?
- 3) Does using translation as a pedagogical tool have a significant effect on facilitating learning and grasping medical texts?

3.2. Research participants

All weak in-service sophomores (adult learners from the Mekong Delta Regions, South of Vietnam), both control and experimental group members (a total of 230), were expected to participate in the survey. These individuals were adult males and females attending 4 medical classes at CTUMP, with ages ranging from 25 to 35. However, the final sample for the study consisted of 225 students, including 118 males and 107 females. The reduction in the sample size was a result of some students' absence on the survey days and others providing incomplete responses on the questionnaire.

3.3. Research instruments

The questionnaire served as a tool to investigate problems faced by less proficient students in learning reading within ESP classes and their perspectives regarding the use of their mother tongue. The initial version of the questionnaire was piloted with 50 second-year students at CTUMP to obtain constructive feedback. Subsequently, it underwent careful revision to ensure accuracy, conciseness, comprehensiveness, and focus. Following the revisions, the questionnaires were distributed directly to students during their classes. Finally, the data gathered from the questionnaires was analyzed using SPSS 22.0 and presented in an organized manner through graphs and charts.

As for the experimental method employed in ESP reading classes, the control group focused on comprehension skills such as scanning, skimming, using context clues, and making predictions. On the other hand, the experimental group received support through translation (English-Vietnamese). At the end of the semester, a two-passage test was conducted for both the experimental and control groups, with scores ranging from one to four. The students' scores underwent statistical analysis. Comparing the results of both groups helped in reaching a conclusion about the impact of translation in aiding weaker students' learning and comprehension of medical texts.

4. Findings and discussion

The following were the findings of the study towards the research questions.

4.1. The problems that weak medical learners face in ESP reading class

The challenges that the majority of students experienced in their ESP reading classes are primarily their insufficient vocabulary and reading abilities (60.9%). In terms of vocabulary, they had difficulty comprehending individual words in the reading material, particularly idioms, verb phrases, or noun phrases (65.4%). Interestingly, they noted that medical reading texts contain a higher proportion of unfamiliar words compared to general English reading texts (72.5%).

Turning to reading skills, most students (79.1%) reported that their limited vocabulary hindered their ability to guess the meanings of new words or deduce the overall content of the text based on context clues. Without a solid grasp of medical terms, 69.2% of students

expressed dissatisfaction with their ESP courses. Consequently, they found a solution by resorting to translation into their native language (Vietnamese) while reading during ESP classes (62.6%).

It should be emphasized that the problems faced by CTUMP students were similar to those identified at various schools. Like in other previous studies (Rushwan, 2017; Kavaliauskiene, 2007), the findings regarding the challenges encountered by ESP students include difficulty in understanding medical terminology and reading comprehension, along with their extremely limited vocabulary. This similarity suggests that translation could be an appropriate strategy for meeting the specific needs of ESP medical learners.

4.2. Weak students' perceptions of the use of mother tongue in ESP classes

As seen in the figure, weak adult students held positive perceptions regarding the use of their mother tongue in ESP classes. A significant percentage of students agreed that incorporating their mother tongue in ESP reading lessons has several benefits, such as improving their performance in classwork and quizzes (86.8%), encouraging them to do their homework (85.7%), instilling confidence (84.6%), stirring their curiosity for more knowledge (80.2%), and making them more attentive and responsive in ESP classes (70.3%).

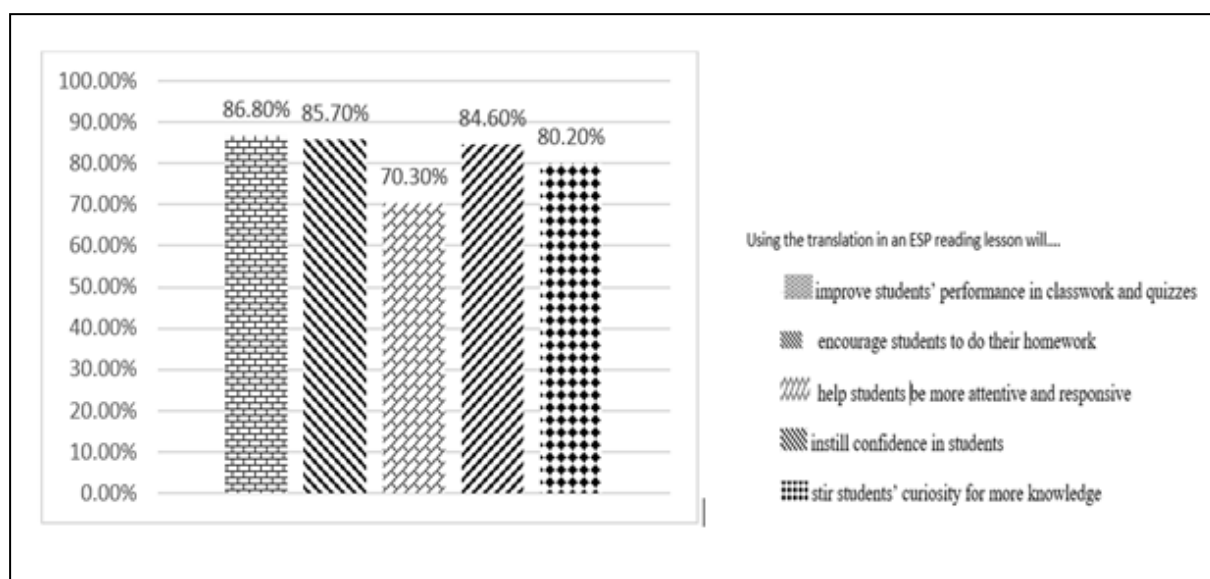


Figure 4.1: Adult weak in-service medical students' positive perceptions towards the use of mother tongue in ESP classes

The majority of weak adult students displayed a strong awareness of the advantages of using their mother tongue for developing learners' reading abilities. Specifically, 92.8% of students agreed that using their native language (L1) enables them to better understand medical terminologies. This understanding greatly facilitates their reading, helping them comprehend medical texts and extract the gist of a text (90.6%). Moreover, it assists in enhancing and reinforcing their reading skills and strategies (86.8%), enabling learners to

compare and contrast medical-scientific concepts (87.9%). Remarkably, 59.9% of students stated that using the mother tongue would reduce rote learning (Figure 4.2).

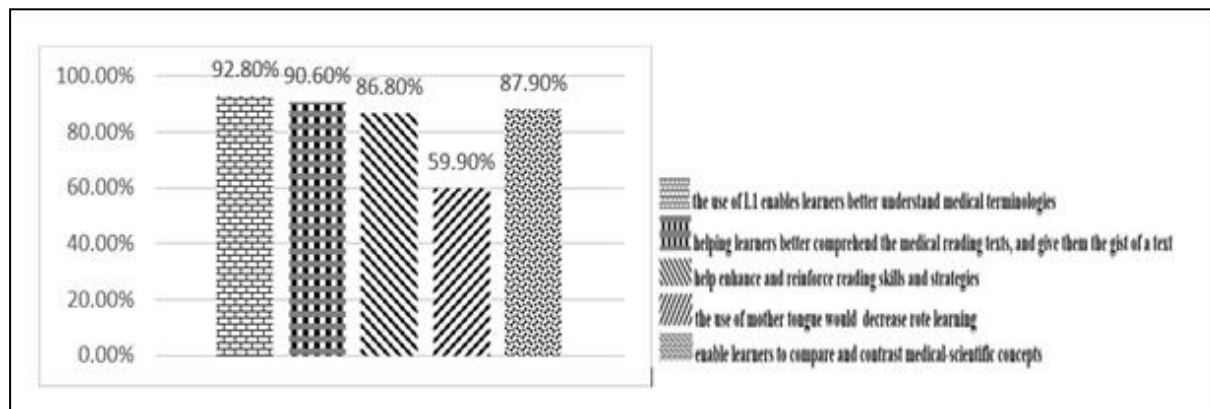


Figure 4.2: Benefits of the use of mother tongue for developing reading abilities

In Figure 4.1 and 4.2, we observe the perspectives of ESP medical learners with low English proficiency concerning the utilization of their native language in ESP reading comprehension classes. Consistent with various studies in this field, the students held favorable attitudes (Schweers 1999, Fernandez-Guerra 2014). They concurred that integrating their mother tongue in ESP reading sessions not only enhanced their performance during classwork and quizzes but also motivated them to complete their homework. Comprehending reading exercises instilled confidence and ignited their curiosity for further knowledge. They perceived themselves as being more engaged and responsive.

In addition, the majority of the learners demonstrated a keen awareness of the advantages of incorporating their mother tongue to improve their reading abilities. Specifically, students acknowledged that using their native language facilitated a better understanding of medical terminology. This, in turn, significantly helped their comprehension of medical reading materials, allowing them to grasp the main points of a text. Using L1 was also seen to advance and reinforce their reading skills and strategies, enabling learners to make comparisons and contrasts between medical-scientific concepts. Unexpectedly, a notable portion of the students expressed that employing their mother tongue could reduce rote learning.

The findings revealed that the weakest students were in favor of using their mother tongue in ESP medical reading comprehension classes, as L1 helps increase their involvement. They considered the lessons to be more comprehensive. This strengthens our argument for the integration of translation in ESP reading comprehension courses.

4.3. The effects of using mother tongue as a pedagogical tool on facilitating learning and grasping medical texts

The scores of the reading comprehension tests for the two groups are as follows:

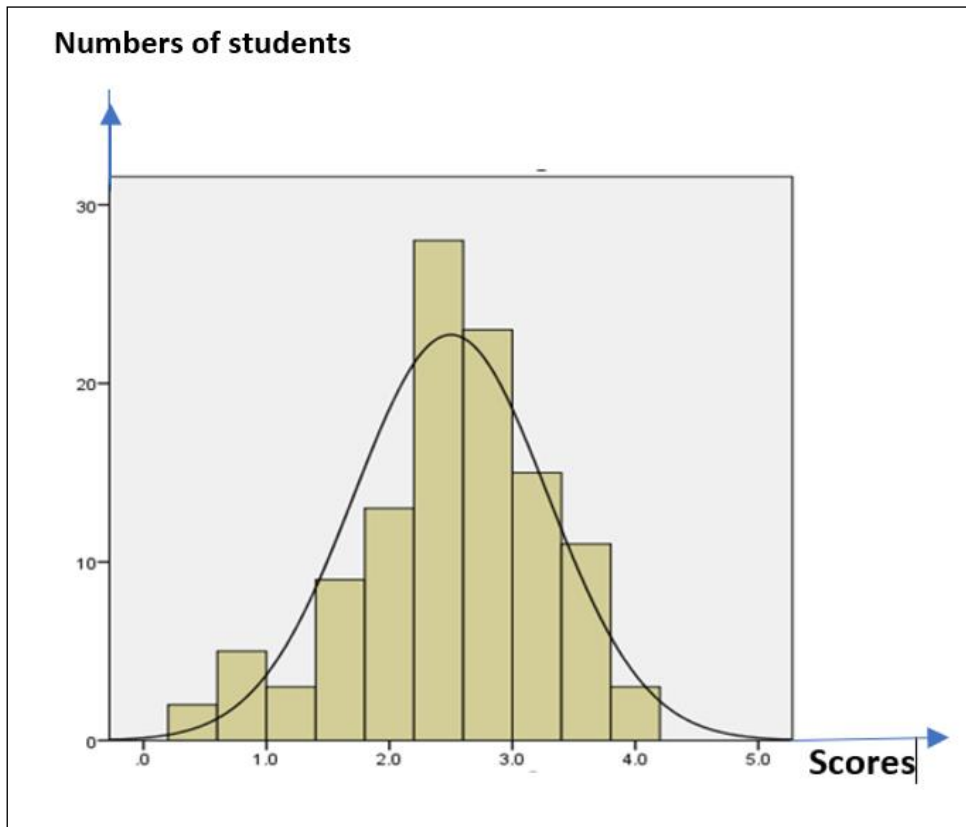


Figure 4.3: Score Distribution of the control group (n=112)

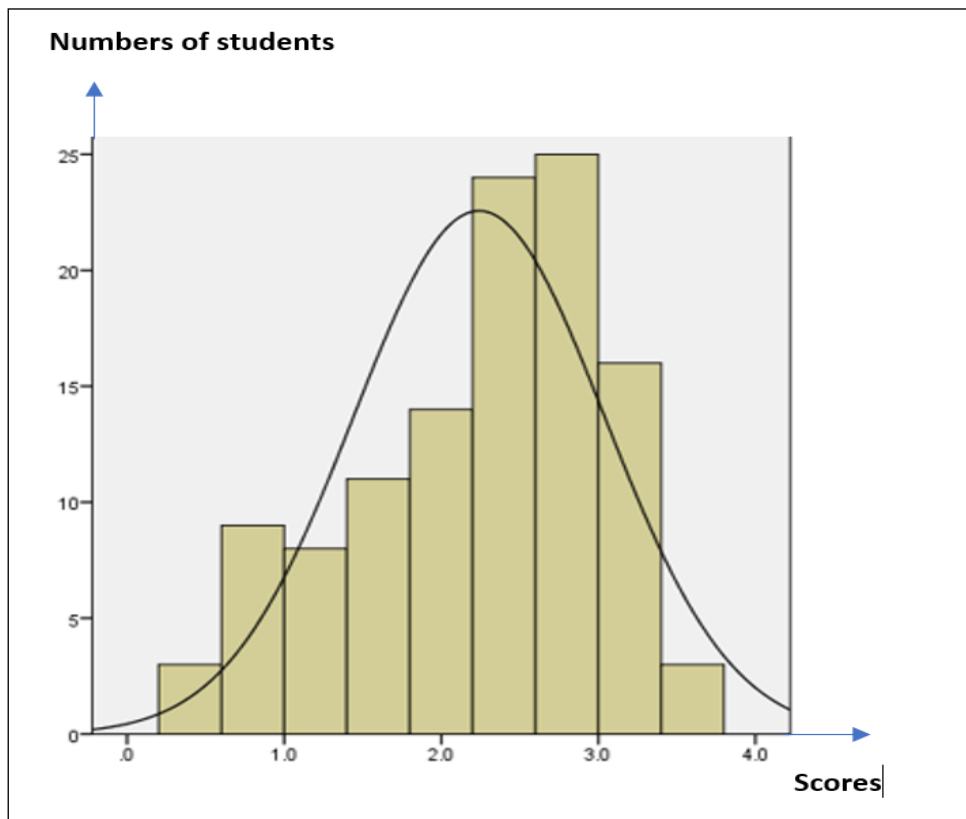


Figure 4.4: Score distribution of the experimental group (n=113)

As evidenced by the data, the experimental group's performance surpasses that of the control group.

Table 4.1: Correlation of mean scores between two groups (n=225)

Group	Mean±SD	Mean Difference ± SD	P
Control	2.50±0.79	2.59±1.10	0.015
Experimental	2.24±0.80		

The aim of this study was to investigate how incorporating translation impacts the reading comprehension abilities of ESP medical students. Statistically speaking, there is a notable disparity in mean scores between the two groups, with a significance value of $p = 0.015$ ($p < 0.05$) and a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.816. These results highlight the efficacy of employing translation in the instruction of ESP reading comprehension, aligning with the insights presented by Çelik and Topkaya (2016) and Rushwan (2017) pertaining to the importance of translation as a pedagogical tool in developing ESP reading skills for undergraduate medical students.

The following points serve as a summary of the study and its pedagogical implications:

- 1) Students have a positive perception of incorporating translation in ESP reading classes.
- 2) Lack of vocabulary and reading skills are common problems for CTUPM learners.
- 3) The experimental group demonstrates better performance in reading comprehension compared to the control group.
- 4) Utilizing translation as a pedagogical tool proves helpful and beneficial in boosting the comprehension skills of ESP medical learners, particularly those with lower levels of English proficiency.

5. Conclusion

In our study, medical learners encountered common challenges while studying ESP medical reading comprehension. These challenges primarily involved in limited vocabulary and difficulty applying reading skills, hindering their comprehension of medical texts and discouraging their ESP learning efforts. Consequently, students found value in incorporating their mother tongue (Vietnamese) into medical English. This approach not only enhanced their engagement and interest in learning but also expanded their knowledge. The study also supported the use of the learners' native language (L1) within ESP courses.

5.1. Limitations and recommendations

The post-test, conducted with only two reading passages and ten questions, was insufficient to thoroughly assess the learners' performance. It is essential to conduct the post-test with a greater variety of reading passages to increase the reliability of using translation as a teaching method for ESP reading comprehension. Moreover, additional studies on this methodology should be undertaken to improve instruction in various specialized fields and other skills.

Acknowledgements

First of all, the researchers would like to express their sincere thanks to the lecturers of Can Tho University of Medicine and Pharmacy (CTUMP), Vietnam for their teaching and supervision of ESP medical courses there. Secondly, their great thanks would come to the in-service medical students at CTUMP for their kind cooperation in the research. Last but not least, their deep thanks would go to the *European Journal of Multilingualism and Translation Studies Board* for their supporting this article to be published in order to bring this paper to those interested in Vietnamese education, especially English teaching and learning through translation techniques to EFL learners for ESP courses on the way to the global and regional cooperation and development as well.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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