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Ecuadorian Students' Perception on the Use of Translation in the EFL Classroom

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Abstract

For over half a century, the upward trend to rather demonize the use of the first language (L1) has led to its complete disregard and interdiction by many language institutions around the world due to the ever-so-trendy idea that any use of the L1 will be seen as counter-productive and even damaging to one's intent on the acquisition of the second language (L2) (Carreres, 2006). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to demonstrate what students believe as beneficial or unfavorable when it comes to using translation in the classroom either by the teacher, the students themselves or within the lesson in general. A total of 115 Ecuadorian students were surveyed with simple true or false statements regarding their opinion on translation. The students were arranged in two groups: A1 level and B1 level students. The answers from the survey were then averaged out in percentage form. The study suggests that there are indeed different opinions as to the use of translation in class. However, in general, it is perceived that lower-level students believe that normal use of translation in the classroom is a good method of or essential to learning, while most upper-level students prefer either solo use of the L2 or at least minimal use of the L1 in class.

Keywords: Translation, English, Spanish, foreign language, learning, EFL.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The use of translation in the EFL classroom has grown to become an ever-increasingly unrespected form of teaching ever since new changes to antiquated methods, such as the grammar-translation method, were put in place starting at the turn of the 20th century (Molina et al., 2005). Over recent years, however, there has been much reconsideration as to how just ineffective utilizing the first language (L1) may be. While there are considerable reasons as to why the use of the L1 is unrewarding for the second language (L2) acquisition, other controversial theories have sprung up that may champion the use of translation in the classroom (Fernandez-Guerra, 2014). Simply put, there are good arguments for and against it by professionals who have delved deeply into this subject.

However, what might adult language students think? Would students themselves agree or disagree on whether translation in the classroom may play a role in their learning strategies? Would they believe translation to be a hindrance to their capability of acquiring the L2 or do they believe it as a complement? Although this research has been carried out with Spanish speakers, specifically those living in the Cañar province of Ecuador, similar research has also been actualized in other parts of the world. In fact, according to many students' opinions in other countries ranging from Mexico to Turkey, the use of the L1 in the classroom is actually not seen as a hindrance to foreign language learning as many proponents of the sole use of the L2 might think (Arenas-Iglesias, 2006; Artar, 2017; Boshrabadi, 2014; Cunningham, 2000).

The purpose of this study is to obtain opinionated data on behalf of students regarding whether or not translation in the classroom would prove to be beneficial in L2 acquisition. It is hoped that this study provides useful insight catering to students' general opinions regarding their personal beliefs on the use of translation. In short, it is, if one will, data based on students' needs analyses concerning translation in the classroom.

In order to carry out this quantitative-qualitative research, a group of Spanish-speaking students with an A1 level of English (first-level English students) and another group with a B1 level of English (sixth-level English students) were given surveys with 10 questions regarding the main topic at hand. It is important to take into account that, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2018), A1 students have an elementary level while B1 students have an intermediate level.

What remains to be seen by further research in this area is whether or not students are correct in their answers. Regardless of students' opinions concerning the use of the L1, does the use of the L1 actually result in increased or decreased language acquisition, especially in the long run? For example, Cunningham (2000) suggests that using translation allows for cognitive awareness of certain grammatical elements of which adult pupils previously had no clue. However, she does admit that, even though students can easily make self-corrections based on prior L1-L2 activities, "this does not mean that students do not make the same mistakes" (Cunningham, 2000, p. 9). Therefore, although students may want to use or feel comfortable using the L1 (or not), further research into the long-term effects of such practice may be needed. It must be insisted, nevertheless, that this research will not delve into the subject of the long-term effects of the use of translation in the EFL classroom and its relationship with language acquisition, but rather simply focus on students' perceptions as to whether or not translation is seen as a positive tool.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Reforms to the formerly traditional grammar-translation method began to show face even before the turn of the 20th century when François Gouin, a French teacher who not only studied but even translated German literary works, realized that he could not understand anything in German when he took part in conversations. This, in turn, led him to create the direct method of teaching, in which strong emphasis is placed on the use, repetition and mimicking of movements associated with the target language (Molina et al., 2005). But it was not until the 1960s when new communicative theories of language teaching started to take shape, stating that students will always gain the most out of a class taught only in the L2 (Molina et al., 2005).

Nowadays, as any EFL teacher may have experienced, there are many adversaries to the use of the L1 in the classroom as will be expressed below. On the other hand, proponents of L1 use, whether scholars or language learners themselves, provide well-founded arguments disclaiming the sole utilization of the target language, as will be discussed in section 2.2.

2.1 Arguments against Translation in the Classroom

Contenders against the use of translation in the classroom claim that it interferes with the natural learning and acquisition of the L2 insofar that students are not able to express themselves freely (House, 2009; Topolska-Pado, 2010). If translation is used too much in the classroom, either by the teacher or the student, the L2 learner will eventually depend too much on the L1 to the point that he/she will just simply abandon any attempts at understanding meanings from context (Topolska-Pado, 2010).

Additionally, many teachers advocating the use of the L2 only in class claim that translation “deprives students of opportunities to receive sufficient L2 input” (Pan & Pan, 2012, p. 4). According to the Communicative Language Approach, the L1 simply has no particular role in the language classroom as it would hinder any type of authentic and communicative activities with which students are meant to practice for gaining proficiency (Pekkanli, 2012).

Many teachers themselves may have a sense of guilt or unprofessionalism if they feel the need to use the L1 in the classroom. Many have experienced that any confession on the adoption of the L1 as a means of getting his/her point across to students will often be met with criticism and in some cases reprimand by the head of the institution. In fact, the use of resorting to the students’ L1 may actually be seen as a sign of lack of or insufficient teaching knowledge (Asgarian, 2013).

In addition, in language classes in countries where the L2 taught is the native language (e.g. English taught in the UK), there may be more than one student of a nationality who speaks a different language from another student’s L1. Therefore, unless the teacher at hand can potentially speak every language in the world, the use of translation is hardly practical.

2.2 Arguments for Translation in the Classroom

However, one must consider whether translation is really an outdated form of teaching that should be disregarded completely due to relatively new designs inspired by ideas from the Communicative Language Approach. First of all, whether the language teacher likes it or not, translation is absolutely unavoidable, especially at

lower levels and when dealing with adults. Adults have brain patterns that work differently to children's (House, 2009) and they also have more worldly experience than children which will inevitably allow adults to use a top-down form of processing information received due to the knowledge they already possess. In other words, especially low-level adult learners will try to use their own cultural and linguistic knowledge of the L1 in order to perceive information given to them in the L2.

The popular saying that in order to learn a new language, one must always think in that language is great except for the fact that one cannot think in the new language if he/she does not know it. This, of course, is where translation has to play a role; the use of translation by students is a natural tendency. Topolska-Pado (2010) makes a good point by stating that students tend to identify with their L1 that which is newly discovered from the L2, thus causing them to be translators from the very beginning of their training. It is indeed true that although in most cases, the transfer shall remain positive (Cunningham, 2000), translation may cause negative interference, such as wrong language usage that no native speaker would adopt. Nonetheless, it is flawed to think that this sort of automatic translation does not occur on a habitual level. As such, it should be considered important that with proper guidance, students can also learn that translation, whether from the teacher or from activities, helps to understand the idea that the L2 is, in fact, a different language, and with that come different rules and ways of saying and expressing ideas. Essentially, with translation, students can understand that certain phrases and structures may be said in the L1 a certain way, but not in the L2 (Topolska-Pado, 2010). Consequently, the use of translation can assist students in recognizing comparisons and contrasts of structures and grammar points between the L1 and the L2, which can hardly be seen as interfering with one's acquisition of the target language. All in all, instead of translation, whether inside or outside of the classroom, being a hindrance or an "unnatural co-presence of the mother tongue" (House, 2009, p. 60), it should rather be viewed as quite natural and normal to switch back and forth between the L1 and the L2.

Secondly, when taking up a new language, many students will be faced with some fear and anxiety (Arenas-Iglesias, 2006), especially when it comes time to doing speaking activities. Many students have insisted that if they are allowed to express themselves first in the L1 and then convert their discourse to the L2, they tend to feel more at ease (Pan & Pan, 2012). Moreover, when the teacher is explaining something in the L2, it has often been noted that students may be more susceptible to drift in thought. A few translations, at least on some of the most important points in a lecture, may allow for students to snap back into and pay attention to the core of the lesson.

In addition, as many teachers know, translation can definitely assist with instructions and explanations in the classroom. How often have bilingual teachers been faced with a student who has asked a question dealing with the L2 and the teacher could either give a clear explanation in the L1 in two minutes and then move on from there or spend 20 minutes giving the same explanation in the L2, but with an added increased chance that the student did not fully understand anyway? Students themselves often comment on how well they are able to understand certain concepts when the teacher gives explanations in the mother tongue (Artar, 2017).

In this regard, it is true that the methods of teaching a foreign language have changed for the better over the last 100 years and that perhaps the old-school grammar/translation method is an antiquated form of teaching. Be that as it may, can one really claim that translation itself, in general, is a broken form to apply to one's teaching strategies? Or could one just rather fathom the idea that, just like the textbook

or the chalkboard or the radio, translation is a tool which can be utilized to help increase the student's knowledge of the L2, and that it is not necessarily a hindrance to one's language acquisition?

3. METHODS

In order to carry out this research, a survey was carried out consisting of 10 statements that A1 and B1 students may consider as true or false based on their own personal opinion. The survey taps into many areas of the use of translation in the classroom. For example, there are statements that deal with whether or not the teacher should revert back to the L1, and if so, how much, when, and why. Additionally, a couple of accounts from the survey relate to how students would feel if English were the only medium of communication. Finally, one can see some aspects of the survey that give an account of students' personal relationship to the use of translation and whether they normally use it or not, both inside, and to some extent, outside the classroom. It is important to note that although many surveys and questionnaires have been used to carry out similar research topics concerning the use of translation in the EFL classroom (Artar, 2017), the particular survey that was conducted in this research was purely elaborated by the authors of this article without any outside influence. It was done so in order to be as authentic for the research, straightforward to the students, and concise with the answers as possible.

The conditions that had to be met in order for students to take the survey were that they had to either be in level 1 (A1) or level 6 (B1). They had to be over the age of 18, and they had to be studying English on a regular basis. It is in our opinion that A1 levels, in which students are just starting out with the L2, and B1 levels, in which students tend to have more or less an intermediate level of their L2, are usually at the most crucial stage for translation to be considered an option. It is for this reason that C1 level students, those with an advanced level of the target language, did not participate in this research since in that level, we believe that translation should play little or no pivotal role in the student's learning. The tracking-polling was done in Cañar Province, Ecuador, at Universidad Nacional de Educación (UNAE) [National University of Education of Ecuador], and yielded a representative sample of the English students of this University.

Throughout this report, the survey results are used to estimate the approximate number of students at UNAE, which is in the hundreds, who engage in the English-learning process. As with most survey results, these figures are only an estimate. Any reached figure could be somewhat larger or smaller given the margin of sampling error associated with the survey results used in deriving these figures. The survey itself was given individually to 115 students during their English lessons. Although the number of students of each level was not even (62 A1 students and 53 B1 students), we believe that the sum for each is sufficient in order to estimate, in general, how students feel regarding this topic. It is, therefore, expected that the average results from the survey, which is in percentage form, can give some insight as to what students themselves believe as appropriate relative to the use of translation in the classroom, regardless of the ongoing debates among respected scholars.

4. RESULTS

Figure 1 shows the 10 true/false questions from the survey given to level 1 (A1) students and level 6 (B1) students. Figure 2 shows the answers to the survey, based on percentage form, to which the students answered “true”.

- Question 1: I think I would learn more English if the teacher normally teaches in Spanish instead of English.
- Question 2: The teacher should explain topics in English. He/she should explain things in different ways if necessary, but always in English, even if it takes a long time for students to understand or if the topic is not fully understood.
- Question 3: The teacher should teach half of the class in English and half in Spanish.
- Question 4: The teacher should always teach in Spanish.
- Question 5: It gives me a clear sense of satisfaction to understand a given class only in English.
- Question 6: I would usually prefer that the teacher explained some things in Spanish so that I could understand perfectly.
- Question 7: When the class is presented 100% of the time in English, I tend to lose focus on the subject.
- Question 8: I think the number of students is an important factor in determining if the teacher should speak more Spanish or English in class. If the class is very large, the teacher should speak Spanish.
- Question 9: Translation activities are a good learning method.
- Question 10: I normally have to translate to Spanish in order to understand what is said or written in English.

Figure 1. The questionnaire.

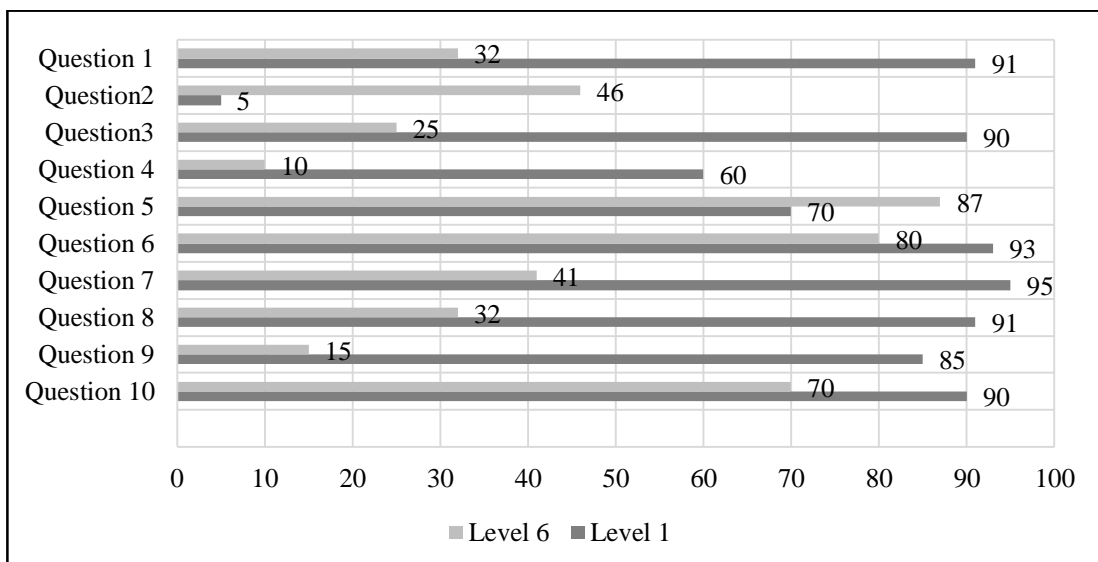


Figure 2. Survey results in percentage form.

As can be seen from Figure 2, in general, a staggering 90% of students believe that they would learn more English if the L1 were used as a medium of instruction. In fact, they believe that half of the class should be taught in the L1. On a more extreme measure, over half of the respondents feel that they would acquire more English if it were taught only in Spanish.

Of course, the situation changes toward the other end of the spectrum when students have already obtained quite a bit of experience in the L2. As one can see, few consider that they would actually learn more if the teacher were to use Spanish under normal circumstances, and only 10% would argue that Spanish should be used as the only method of teaching.

Also, as provided in Figure 2, one can clearly see the A1's favorable opinion in regards to the use of translation in the classroom, even when dealing with translation activities. Only in Question 6 do we find that the vast majority of students with a B1 level agree that the use of the L1 is good only occasionally. Oddly enough, most of these same students, those with a B1 level, apparently consider the use of translation activities or exercises as a rather bad way of learning the L2.

5. DISCUSSION

As can be seen from the results, according to most students' points of view, the use of translation is necessary, especially in low-level classes. It should be emphasized that nearly all A1 students prefer Spanish, or the L1, to be used as a medium for better understanding when learning English. What is astounding is that even 60% of the student body believes that Spanish should be used 100% of the time in order to teach English. There may be several reasons for this data. First of all, the students themselves may not be too keen on learning English in the first place. As it stands, one main requirement to achieve a bachelor's degree at UNAE is to successfully obtain at least a B1 level of English (or any foreign language for that matter) before graduation. It may be perceived that students who have not yet reached an A2 level by the time they turn 18 or by the time they reach their first semester of college are really not interested in acquiring the English language at all. It is true that in Ecuador, English as a foreign language is mandatory to learn in grade school ([British Council, 2015](#)); however, if students who reach their first semester of college cannot even put a simple sentence together in English, but still manage to graduate from high school, it may mean that they are somehow able to pass while foregoing the obligatory requirements of English learning in order to graduate. Whatever the case may be, students at UNAE, are now forced to learn a subject matter in which they might have absolutely no interest, and therefore, prefer not to leave their comfort zone of exploring new vocabulary, grammar structure, and above all, listening and speaking practice in English.

Another reason as to why over 50% of A1 level students are reluctant to immerse themselves into a mainly-English-taught atmosphere, let alone a course taught only in English, is because of the subject's intimidating nature; it can plank down on them. If this happens, in theory, the intimidation of English can quickly turn into anxiety, which can be broken down into three sections: communication apprehension, the concern of social ridicule by peers, and overall academic uneasiness, as, for instance, during exam time ([Brown, 2000](#)). On an elevated level, this can lead to general tension, frustration, and boredom inside as well as outside of the classroom ([Meyer, 2008](#)).

Whatever the case for the aforementioned topic, nearly all of the A1 students believe that Spanish should be used in some way or another, even when dealing with many learning activities (Question 9). From these results, it may be safe to assume that without the use of the L1, at least in some form, students could feel that they will face huge difficulties understanding the subject matter, they will lose focus on the lesson at

hand if English is used as the only medium of teaching, and explanations answering certain questions only in English may cause confusion.

Additionally, nearly all students at both levels admit that they often use translation themselves for written and spoken target language texts or utterances. This affirms the idea that, especially for adult students, it is inevitable that language learners will adopt the rules formed from L1 linguistical elements to the target language (House, 2009; Topolska-Pado, 2010). In the initial stages of language learning, students quite surely feel the need to pick up grammatical structures and language components through translation in order to grasp their structures clearly and compare them with those of their first language (Calis & Dikilitas, 2012). It may actually not be such a good idea to teach 100% of the class in the L1, as 60% of A1 language learners deem as necessary, but it is easy to perceive that without any use of the L1, language learners may feel lost and unsure about their progress.

On the other hand, the situation changes a little for higher level students. Those who were surveyed holding a B1 level were more resistant to the use of the L1 in the EFL classroom. While most students agree that the teacher should not revert to the L1 100% of the time or even half of the time, the majority believe that the use of Spanish sometimes, especially to clarify any problems or questions about the lesson, would prove beneficial. However, using the L1 seems to be solely restricted to this instance for most learners. It is even more interesting to point out that most do not feel the size of the classroom as an influential factor as to how much of the L1 the teacher should use, and what is most strikingly surprising is the fact that many prefer even not to practice with translation activities. It is easy, however, to speculate the reason for almost total disregard for the L1 in the EFL setting: as the learner's L2 knowledge increases, his/her dependency of the L1 decreases and acquisition of the L2, taught in the L2, becomes easier (Sharaeai, 2012). We believe this to be true, as well, which is why, as commented before, C1 level students were not used for this research.

Just as was stated earlier at the beginning of section 2.2, in both levels, according to the majority of students' opinion in regards to Question 10 of the survey, translation of some form is essential when dealing with English. As House (2009) mentions, in lower levels of the L2, it is absolutely impossible for translation not to occur naturally. Our study reflects this theory even up until the B1-level spectrum. Hence, the hypothesis still holds true that according to most language students, the use of translation, whether inside or outside the classroom, is an effective strategy for foreign language acquisition (Arenas-Iglesias, 2006; Artar, 2017; Cunningham, 2000).

Although one can see a clear difference between most level 1 and level 6 students' preferences, there is one point that students from both levels have in common: they both feel a great sensation of satisfaction when they are able to understand the L2 effectively in the classroom. One may be able to conclude that, with enough patience and persistence in English or whatever the foreign language may be, this kind of satisfaction will eventually come. Nevertheless, it is important to remember: learning a language does require patience and persistence. It is not something that occurs overnight, and as long as one is willing to continue with his/her education, the level of language acquisition and self-satisfaction will ultimately be achieved.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Our findings indicate that there is a clear difference in criteria between level one and level six students according to the results of the survey. It can be perceived that most level 1 students prefer to include Spanish in their English classes, while most level 6 students do not. However, much of the outcome coincides with the results concluded by other researchers. Although fewer level 6 students than level 1 students agree to this, still, over half of the students in both levels confess that translation is helpful and/or necessary in order to fully comprehend different concepts (Question 2; Question 6).

Although teaching styles are different and there is no ‘Holy Grail’ method of teaching a foreign or second language, one can come to the assumption that, based on the outcome from the above surveys, translation ought to play at least some role in the language classroom, especially when dealing with lower-level adult students. Simply put, our findings suggest that the use of translation in the classroom is felt to be essential by low-level adult language learners.

Of course, there will always be understandable arguments as to why the L1 should never be implemented in the classroom. However, when it comes to foreign language teaching, if the teacher does, in fact, have knowledge of the L1 and utilizes it in order to get his/her message across to others about the L2, the first language’s occasional use should be considered as rather a tool to be utilized in the teaching/learning process, and not regarded as a hindrance or a setback. In our opinion, Claypole (2016) makes an interesting point when he mentions that just because other teachers may have no knowledge of the student’s native language, it is unfair and inconsiderate of a valuable resource to impose an L2 only policy, and thus, ban the use of translation in the classroom for a language teacher who is blessed enough to actually have full knowledge of the L1.

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