

## USING TRANSLATION IN ELT IN OMAN: A PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVE OF PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES.

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### ABSTRACT

Role of L1 in learning L2 cannot be underestimated. Research supports the view that L1 is a good tool for learning L2. Students get a sense of security and express themselves better if native language is incorporated into lessons (Schweers, 1999). Once again, researchers have started recognizing the importance of 'bilingual teaching method' and many are advocating incorporation of L1 to foster and facilitate second language learning (Cunningham(2000), Mohuanna(2009), Ross (2000), Schweers(1999). This is an exploratory study to learn about the views and perceptions of teachers and students at Dhofar University towards the use of Arabic in their classes. A questionnaire that included most areas of concern in using L1 in EFL classes was administered. The study indicated that almost all students and teachers were not opposing the use of L1 in classes, however, a judicious use of L1 is recommended by both teachers and students. Interestingly, the students at Dhofar University think that communication between teachers and students should be in English and dependence on L1 should be only in certain situations.

**KEY WORDS:** Translation, First Language (L1), Second Language (L2), Perceptions

### INTRODUCTION

A close look at the education system in Oman shows that the native language (Arabic) is the dominant language used in all teaching learning situations including English Language Teaching. There has been a considerable debate about learning English through translation. Opinions are divided on the use of translation in the classroom. Arabic was used as a medium of instruction in classes with frequent translations in most schools in Oman. Exceptions are few and these are primarily private schools. In the past, English was introduced at grade four; however, the government in Oman has taken a new step to introduce English when pupils start school as English language skills are becoming essential to the people for many purposes including their daily life activities. The teaching of English has assumed increasing importance in recent years.

The attitudes of teachers and learners vary towards the use of L1 in English language teaching. Some researchers have studied the attitudes of learners and others have studied the perceptions of both teachers and learners. Very few studies, however, have been done on Arab learners of English and their teachers.

Mustafa Nazary (2008:147) studied the perceptions of students in an Iranian university and found that students were reluctant to use their L1 (Farsi) to learn English. They strongly rejected the use of L1 because they wanted to get more and better exposure to English. He looked at the perceptions of students with various levels of English. Surprisingly, the results of his study showed that in comparison

to elementary and advanced students, the intermediate level students were more reluctant to use L1 in their classroom and they wanted their teachers to refrain from using Farsi. These findings are surprising because other studies show that the more advanced the students, the less the demand for L1. This can be seen in Schweers (1999), for example, who studied the way Spanish is used to teach English in Puerto Rico and found that students liked to use their mother tongue in class as it facilitates the language learning process. He conducted his study on Spanish speaking students learning English and discovered that a high percentage of them wanted the use of L1 in their English classes to acquire the different language skills. This conclusion is very similar to Prodromou's (2002), in which he studied the way Greek students perceived the use of their L1 in EFL classes. He carried out his study on 300 students and concluded that the more advanced the students became, the less dependent they were on their mother tongue.

One of the few studies on Arabic speakers was carried out by Mouhamad Mouhanna (2009) in the United Arab Emirates. He found that students' dependence on L1 is related to their levels of English to a great extent. Students with less proficiency required more L1 support than students with higher levels of English. In the students' view, over-reliance on L1 would be an obstacle to their language learning.

## **TRANSLATION AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING**

Explicitly or implicitly, translation has played an important role in teaching English as a foreign language for a long time. Some people argue that using translation is a useful tool and others argue that the more exposure to the target language the students get, the more proficient they become. Most methods in the past prohibited translation in L2 pedagogy.

Translation as defined by Newmark (1995:5) is "often, though not by any means, always ... rendering the meaning of a text into another language in the way that the author intended the text". Crystal (1998) maintains that it is the translator's duty to preserve naturalness in the translated text. This holds the translator responsible for the message to get through naturally. Naveen Mehta (2010) believes, "Translation in ELT is vital if we consider it as a means, not as an end." Newmark(1981, pp 42-59), points out many skills that are essential in English language learning and teaching. These include sensitivity to language, good knowledge of cultural background, mastering the text being translated, common sense etc. People like David Atkinson (1987, 1993) argue for the necessity of the use of L1 in English learning situations. He believes that proper use of mother tongue usually facilitates better understanding. According to Ross(2000), it is a very important tool of language learning to advanced and intermediate level users of language because they have the ability to code switch or translate from L1to and L2 and vice versa.

On the other hand, people like Dennis Newson (1998) argue against the use of translation in classroom as he thinks it is a "time consuming activity" and considers it "not desirable, since it uses the mother tongue". He also thinks that translation gives false credence to word-to-word equivalence and it detracts from learning within only one language.

## GRAMMAR TRANSLATION METHOD

In the past, a method called the Classical method was used in the western world to teach/learn languages like Greek and Latin which were considered foreign languages. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the same classical method came to be known as the Grammar Translation Method. The main purpose of this method was to make language learning easier. The salient features of Grammar Translation method as stated by Prator and Celce-Murcia(1979:3) are the following:

1. Classes are taught in the mother tongue, with little active use of the target language.
2. Much vocabulary is taught in the form of lists and isolated words.
3. Long elaborate explanations of the intricacies of grammar are given.
4. Grammar provides the rules for putting words together, and instruction often focuses on the form and inflection of words.
5. Little attention is paid to the content of texts, which are treated as exercises in grammatical analysis.
6. Often the only drills are exercises in translating disconnected sentences from the target language into the mother tongue.
7. Little or no attention is given to pronunciation.

There has been research supporting the use of mother tongue in classrooms. For example, Cunningham, C. (2000) believes that translation plays an important role in language teaching/ learning despite some negative effects. He further maintains that translation can contribute to the students' acquisition of foreign language. Similarly, Chellapan (1982) states: "Translation can make the student come to closer grips with the target language. A simultaneous awareness of two media could actually make the student see the points of convergence and divergence more clearly and also refine the tools of perception and analysis resulting in divergent thinking." Dave Tucker and IH Santa Clara in their review of Guy Cook's book, *Translation in Language Teaching*, present Cook's views on translation as a tool for language learning. According to Cook, translation has been (grudgingly) accepted as a useful tool for decades, even if its use opposed recent theories of language learning; translation is inevitable, as Cook points out. According to Cook, translation can be stimulating, fun and enriching. Another researcher supporting the use of the grammar translation method is Shih-Chuan Chang (2011), who concludes that "the Grammar Translation Method is proved to be a suitable and successful teaching approach at Applied Foreign Language Department in the university"

## PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

The main purpose of this study is to determine Omani university students' views and investigate perceptions of translation in teaching/ learning as well as the teachers' perceptions on the use of translation in class activities. For the purpose of the study, the following research questions were identified:

1. What is the attitude of students at Dhofar University in Oman towards using translation as a tool for language learning?
2. What is the attitude of teachers at Dhofar University towards using the Arabic language in English language teaching?
3. Is translation a useful tool in EFL teaching?
4. Will it be an advantage if teachers of English knew Arabic?

## **METHODOLOGY**

Two questionnaires were distributed to one hundred students and 10 teachers of English. All the students were native speakers of Arabic while teachers were either native or non-native speakers of English. The students belonged to the age group of 18 to 22 and were undergraduate students at Dhofar University, Oman. All participant students interviewed were at intermediate level of proficiency in English. Participant faculty was from various parts of the world. Both teachers and students were given some background information about the project and they were informed about the advantages of this project. All the teachers had had previous experience in English language teaching. The questionnaire included 12 questions to cover most areas in the use of translation in the class room. In this research, the questionnaire was an adapted version of Prodromou(2002). The teachers' questionnaire was of two parts. The first part was to obtain their personal information. All the statements were rated on the Likert scale of five possible answers: 1 – strongly disagree, 2 –disagree, 3 – not sure, 4 – agree, 5 – strongly agree. The data obtained were statistically processed and interpreted. Even though Likert scale limits the scope for making generalizations, it was thought apt to make this exploratory study. The data obtained was used for quantitative analysis.

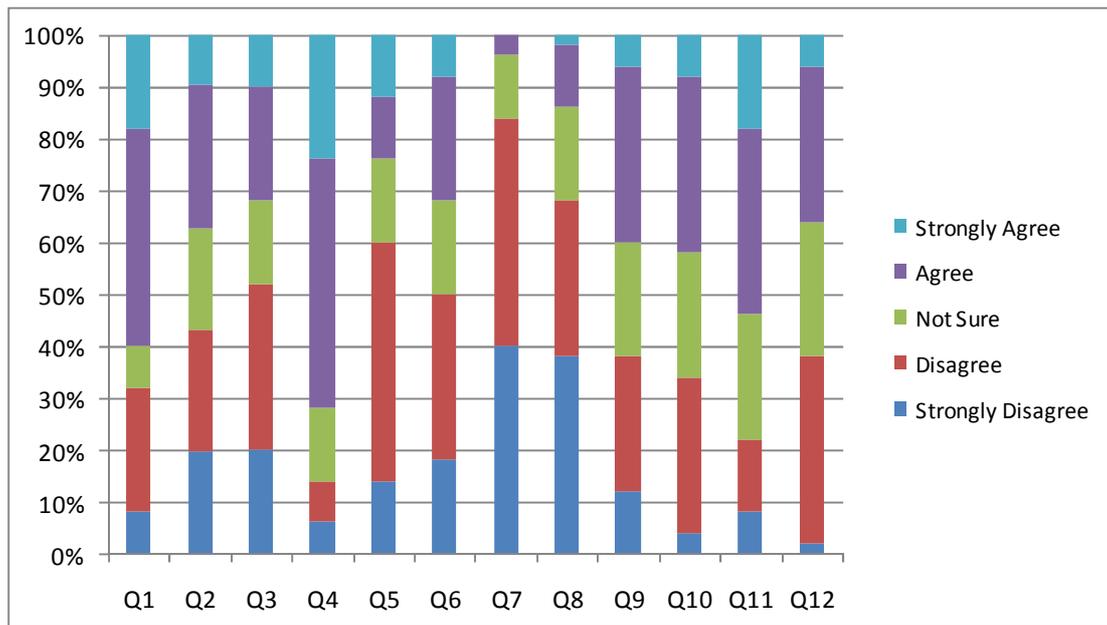
## **DATA ANALYSIS**

Table-1 and Graph-1 represent the students' views and Table 2 and Graph-2 represent the teachers' attitudes and perceptions towards mother tongue use in English as a foreign language teaching and learning situations. The data were transcribed into tables, frequencies and percentages were obtained for each item of the questionnaire. After calculating the frequency and percentages, the data were graphically represented for better analysis.

Table- 1 : Students' perceptions

No	Questions in the survey	SD	D	NS	A	SA
1.	The teacher of English should know Arabic	8%	24%	8%	42%	18%
2.	I prefer a teacher who explains in Arabic to a teacher who explains only in English	20%	24%	20%	26%	10%
3.	It will help if we speak in Arabic in group work and pair work.	20%	32%	16%	22%	10%
4.	The teacher should translate difficult words from English to Arabic	6%	8%	14%	48%	24%
5.	The teacher should explain grammar rules in Arabic.	14%	46%	16%	12%	12%
6.	The teacher should translate the text in hand from English to Arabic	18%	32%	18%	24%	8%
7.	The students should speak in Arabic in class	40%	44%	12%	4%	0%
8.	The teacher should use Arabic in class.	38%	30%	18%	12%	2%
9.	There should be translation tasks in tests.	12%	26%	22%	34%	6%
10.	I understand better if the teacher speaks in Arabic as it is my mother tongue	4%	30%	24%	34%	8%
11.	A teacher who knows Arabic will understand my language learning problems better than a teacher who doesn't speak Arabic	8%	14%	24%	36%	18%
12.	It is essential to explain the instructions in Arabic for better understanding.	2%	36%	26%	30%	6%

\*SD - Strongly disagree \*D- Disagree\*NS- Not Sure\*A-Agree\*SA-Strongly agree



**Graph-1 Students' Perceptions**

Statements 1, 2, and 11 in Table 1 aim at showing whether the students prefer to have teachers who know their L1, i.e., Arabic. For items 1 and 11, the majority of the students preferred to have teachers who know Arabic. 60% of the students either agreed or strongly agreed to the statement and 54% of them either agreed or strongly agreed for item 11. However, item 2 shows that only 36 percent of students prefer lessons to be explained in Arabic. This indicates that students would like to have more exposure to English and at the same time, the teacher who is teaching should have knowledge of their L1.

Statements 3, 7, 8 and 10 attempt to find out if the students liked to communicate in their L1 with their peers and teachers. 52% of the students either disagreed or strongly disagreed that they should use Arabic in group work and pair work. Interestingly, 84 % were against speaking Arabic in class. When asked whether they understood better if the teacher explains the lesson in Arabic, 42% either agreed or strongly agreed and 34% either disagreed or strongly disagreed. The remaining 24% were not sure if they will understand better if their teacher uses Arabic in class. Item number 8 was intended to know whether a teacher should use Arabic in class. A majority of 68 % either disagreed or strongly disagreed. This indicates that most students want their teacher to use English in class.

Items 4, 5, 6,9,12 were designed to investigate whether translation of words, grammar, texts and instructions would be helpful in the students' point of view. Item 4 was targeted to know whether the teacher should translate difficult words into the students' L1 i.e., Arabic. A majority of students (72%) would like difficult words to be translated into Arabic. Statement 5 was designed to find out if the students liked explanation of grammar rules in Arabic. Surprisingly, 60% of them didn't want grammar rules to be explained in Arabic. Item number 6 received a mixed response on whether the teacher should translate the text in hand from English to Arabic, while 18% of them strongly disagreed, 32% agreed, 18% were not sure, 24% agreed and 8% strongly agreed. This response is similar to the response for

items 9 and 12 that enquire whether there should be translation tasks in tests and whether instructions should be explained in Arabic. . For item 9, 38% either strongly disagreed or disagreed, 40% percent of students either strongly agreed or agreed while 22% were not sure. This indicates that the students were not very clear whether inclusion of translations tasks in test would really benefit them. For item 12, 38% either strongly disagreed or disagreed, 36% percent of them either strongly agreed or agreed where as 26% were not sure. Similar to the responses to items, 6 and 9, students were neither supportive nor unsupportive. They seem to be unclear about using translation to explain instructions in class since their opinions were divided. From the above results we can conclude that students have a positive attitude towards the use of translation and they want translation as a tool to learn English, however, there should be restricted use of translation.

**Table- 2: Teachers' perceptions**

No.	Questions	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Not Sure		Agree		Strongly Agree	
		f	p	f	p	f	p	f	p	f	p
1.	The teacher of English should know Arabic.	0	0%	6	60%	0	0%	3	30%	1	10%
2.	Sometimes, I wish I knew students' mother tongue.	0	0%	2	0%	0	0%	4	60%	4	40%
3.	It will help if students speak Arabic in group work and pair work.	2	20%	5	50%	1	10%	1	10%	1	10%
4.	There is a need to translate certain words from English to Arabic.	0	0%	2	20%	0	0%	6	60%	2	20%
5.	The teacher should explain grammar rules in Arabic.	3	30%	4	40%	0	0%	2	20%	1	10%
6.	It is helpful to use mother tongue as a tool for conveying meaning.	1	10%	4	40%	1	10%	3	30%	1	10%
7.	Using mother tongue should be totally prohibited	1	10%	3	30%	1	10%	3	30%	2	20%
8.	Embarrassing situations may arise due to teacher's inability to understand the students' L1.	1	10%	2	20%	0	0%	6	60%	1	10%

9.	Translation tasks should be included in tests.	2	20%	3	30%	1	10%	3	30%	1	10%
10.	A teacher who knows Arabic will understand language learning problems better than a teacher who doesn't speak Arabic.	0	0%	2	20%	1	10%	4	40%	3	30%
11.	At times, communication becomes impossible without translation in an EFL class.	2	20%	4	40%	0	0%	2	20%	2	20%
12.	It is essential to explain the instructions in Arabic for better understanding.	2	20%	4	40%	1	10%	3	30%	0	0%

f-frequency

P-percentage

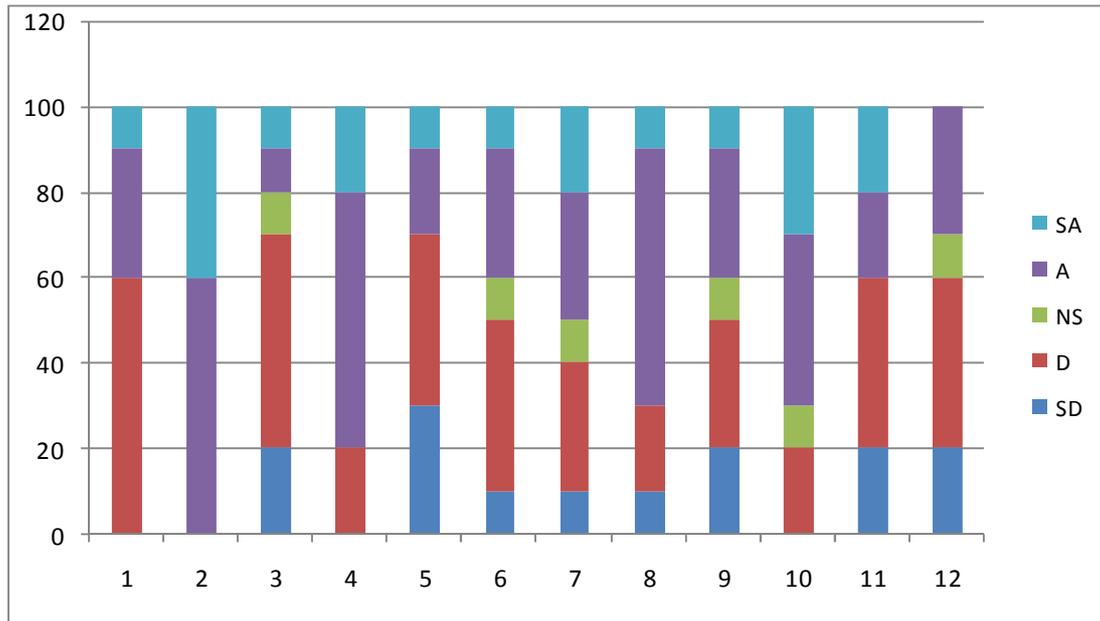


Chart-2 Teachers' perceptions

Teachers' views seem to be opposing some statements and supporting the opinions of students in some areas. Item number 1 shows that a majority of teachers disagreed that the teacher of English should know Arabic in contrast to the students' views. 60% of the teachers disagreed that teachers should know Arabic whereas 60% of the students agreed that the teacher of English should know Arabic. Only 40% of teachers either **agreed or strongly agreed**. Item 2 presents a very interesting observation in this study: all teachers (100%) wished they knew the student's mother tongue.

Item number 3 was aimed at finding out whether it will help students if students use Arabic in group work and pair work. A majority of 70% of teachers either disagreed or **strongly dis** agreed with this. 10% of them agreed, 10% of the teachers strongly agreed and 10% were not sure. Both teachers and students strongly support the view that there is a need to translate certain words from English to Arabic. 80% of the teachers recognize the need of translation of certain words from L2 to L1 (which shows that a complete L2 environment is not supported by the majority of students and teachers).

**Item number 5 received contradictory responses between teachers and students. 70% of the teachers either disagreed or strongly disagreed to the statement that grammar rules should be explained in Arabic. In contrast, 60% of the students wanted grammar rules to be explained in Arabic. 30% of the teachers either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement.**

Item 6 explores whether it is helpful to use mother tongue as a tool for conveying meaning. There was a mixed response from the teachers. 50% of the teachers either strongly disagreed or disagreed whereas 40% of them either strongly agreed or agreed. 10% of them were not sure. Similar to item 6, item 7 received a mixed response as well, when teachers were asked whether using mother tongue should be totally prohibited. 40% of them either strongly disagreed or disagreed, 50 percent either agreed or strongly agreed and 10% were not sure.

70% of teachers believe that embarrassing situations may arise due to the teacher's inability to understand the student's L1, which indicates that it is important for a second language teacher to know the students' L1. Interestingly the teachers also supported the view that a teacher who knows Arabic will understand language learning problems better than a teacher who doesn't speak Arabic. 70% of the teachers either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.

Statement 9 enquires whether translation tasks should be included in tests. 50% of the teachers were opposed to translation whereas 40% of them support the idea and 10% were not sure.

Another very interesting opinion of the teachers is that the teachers who know Arabic will understand language learning problems better than those who do not know the students' L1. 70% of them either agree or strongly agree with the statement 10. 20% disagree and 10% were not sure.

Item 11 shows that a majority of the teachers believe that communication is possible without translation in an EFL class. When asked whether communication becomes impossible without translation, 60% of them either disagreed or strongly disagreed and 40 percent of them either agreed or strongly agreed.

Item 12 shows that the teachers were against the view that it is essential to explain instructions in Arabic for better understanding. 40% disagreed, 20% strongly disagreed, 30% agreed, 10% were not sure and there was no one who strongly agreed. The teachers indicate that they do not need Arabic to explain instructions for better understanding.

## DISCUSSIONS & CONCLUSIONS

From the above data analysis, some very interesting observations can be made. It is observed that teachers' perceptions and students' perceptions contradict in some opinions. Students believed that the teacher of English should know Arabic whereas the teachers believed that there is no need of students' L1 knowledge; however, the majority of the teachers wished they knew students' mother tongue. Students and teachers oppose with their views on translation of grammar rules as well. The majority of teachers disagreed with the translation of grammar rules in Arabic and the majority of students wanted grammar rules to be explained in Arabic. This shows that students like to depend on L1 in certain situations.

Another interesting observation made from this study is that both teachers and students do not like to use Arabic for communication in class. However, when needed, certain words can be translated. Both teachers and students believe that there should be wise use of L1 in class. It can be concluded that use of Arabic should be restricted as much as possible since neither students nor teachers support using Arabic for communication in class. However, in certain situations, students rely on L1 and they view that it will be beneficial to them. Mounna(2009) states that students should be discouraged in over-reliance on L1 in the secondary school. He further mentions, "This would also reduce levels of anxiety and provide much needed scaffolding with new cognitively demanding tasks such as academic writing"

From this study it can be concluded that both teachers and students believe translation can be a useful tool, provided its use is limited and proper. Translation can be used as a means but not an end. A total L2 environment is not supported by both teachers and students. Teachers should use L1 wisely. Students like their teachers to know their L1 but prefer to have their lessons explained in English such that they can get more exposure and practice in English.

The results of this study have important pedagogical implications for EFL teaching. The authorities should not have a rigidly negative attitude towards the use of L1 to foster L2 as it plays a supportive role in facilitating learning. Judicious mix of bilingual reading and comprehension tasks and activities could be incorporated in ELT text books.

This study is limited to the students of one university in Oman and the sample is relatively small. Also, the data for this study was collected using only one tool, i.e., only through questionnaires. Experimental study and its results triangulated with the present one would provide a better scope for generalizations. Research on large samples including other universities may be recommended for future research.

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