

# Translation as Language Learning Technique and the Use of L1 in ESP Classes. Learners' Perceptions

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## Abstract

*This paper presents the findings of a questionnaire offered to ESP students from four academic programs, both first and second year. Its purpose was to assess their perceptions of the course design that included translation activities as language learning devices, as well as the use of L1, specifically for the introduction and revision of difficult terminology related to their respective domains. The feedback was positive, in that a large majority of responders believed that these types of activities boosted their English proficiency, that they were both useful and enjoyable, and that they helped with both grammar and specialized vocabulary. Also, an overwhelming majority found it useful to be given an exact equivalent in L1 for the specialized vocabulary.*

**Key words:** translation, L1, questionnaire, learning technique, ESP

**J.E.L. classification:** Z13

## 1. Introduction

Over the past few years I have incorporated translation activities in the ESP course design. It is important to clarify from the start that the course was neither meant for the training of professional translators nor focused on the Grammar-Translation Method, but included translation activities as a language learning device, a trend that has been gaining momentum for many years (Chirobocea, 2018). My decision was based on my experience with Romanian ESP students who seemed to understand better certain aspects of the English language, especially specialized vocabulary, when translations and L1 were employed. Clarity is important in ESP and not confusing two apparently similar terms is often crucial in domains such as science, law, aviation, medicine or business. In spite of offering explanations or definitions of terms using English only, there was often a feeling of revelation among the students when I offered them the exact equivalent in L1, a mark of the fact that understanding the "gist" is not enough in ESP, as there is no room for confusion in the domains of activity enumerated above. Year by year I began to include more targeted translation activities and I noticed the results improved as the students managed to retain more specialized vocabulary in particular, but also appeared to understand better other aspects of the language as well. However, I wanted to have more concrete evidence of this impression, therefore I used the questionnaire to verify my assumptions.

In my ESP course I used Romanian to English translation activities as a means to introduce, practice or revise specialized vocabulary, as a means to exemplify the use of certain domain-specific phrases and collocations, but also as a means to identify and eliminate negative transfer from Romanian into English, in the context of the specific domain. Polysemy, for example, is an important issue in a specialized text (Buzarna-Tihenea and Nadrag, 2016, p.194) and it was often solved by a translation activity, where the exact meaning of each possible option was discussed and clarified. Thus, the students understood better confusing items of specialized vocabulary. A more general purpose was to have continuous awareness, from lesson to lesson, of the English sentence structure, word order, or the use of what Paul Nation calls function words (articles, pronouns, prepositions and conjunctions) and content words (nouns, verbs and adjectives) (Nation, 2001, p.15). English to Romanian translations were used in order to clarify the exact equivalent of certain

specialized words and to facilitate the understanding of difficult terminology and domain-specific phrases and collocations. All these seemed easier to illustrate and practice by means of translations.

## 2. Theoretical background

While for decades the communicative approach has been the norm in English teaching in general and ESP in particular, my inclination has been to also include translations as a learning device, as well as L1 for difficult terminology. There are new perspectives on the issue of using translations and L1 for English teaching and many practitioners have already explored this path, both in class and in their research. In a previous article I justified the reasons for erasing the stigma from translation as a language learning technique and for the promotion of a more generalized use of it in ESP classes, where it is particularly useful (Chirobocea, 2018) and will not reiterate them here. Numerous researchers investigated this approach and the results were promising in all cases, namely the students were not against translating in order to acquire a better knowledge of the English language and did not reject the use of L1, regardless of proficiency level, because it was considered a part of their cultural background, helpful in the understanding of the new language.

William Schweers's 1999 study is often referenced when it comes to this topic and his questionnaire revealed that over 88% of the students involved felt that L1 should be used in the English class (Schweers, 1999, p.8). Angeles Carreres's 2006 survey regarding the usefulness of translation as a language learning device concluded that "L2 translation is unambiguously perceived by students as conducive to language learning" and that "translation is among the most effective methods to learn a language, if not the most effective" (Carreres, 2006). Posen Liao's complex study highlights a similar conclusion: "On the whole, the participants overwhelmingly believe that translating helps them acquire English language skills such as reading, writing, speaking, vocabulary, idioms, and phrases" (Liao, 2006, p.201). Calis and Dikilitas conclude at the end of their study that learners "would like to and need to learn grammatical patterns through translation activities as they feel surer to have learnt the target input by matching or mismatching with those in their own language" (Calis and Dikilitas, 2012, p.5083). The study conducted by Ana B. Fernández-Guerra had similarly positive reactions as "almost all participants subscribed to the view that using the mother tongue is quite normal when learning a FL" and "they also highly agreed on the fact that translation helps to contrast the students' native language with the FL" (Fernández-Guerra 2014, p.161). A 2017 study on an Iranian EFL setting analyzes the perceptions of both teachers and students and, although the results were not overwhelmingly in favor of translation activities and the use of L1, the authors conclude that such activities can be used in certain cases such as to remove psychological barriers, when teaching complex grammatical structures or difficult vocabulary, or when cultural aspects impede comprehension (Mollalei et al, 2017, p.72). In terms of ESP, the 2007 study accomplished by Kavaliauskienė and Kaminskienė reveals that "all the students are quite positive about the use of mother tongue in English classes, but the amount of it depends on learners' proficiency in English" (Kavaliauskienė and Kaminskienė, 2007, p.136). Also, the results of Mirvan Xhemaili's 2013 study involving Albanian ESP students showed that as much as 75% of the participants felt that L1 should be used in class, specifically for checking comprehension and for new vocabulary items (Xhemaili, 2013, p.193). Ian Tudor's research on ESP learners, as far back as 1987, also draws similarly positive conclusions (Tudor, 1987, p.272).

Numerous other studies (Perkins, 1985; Prince, 1996; Hsieh, 2000; Brooks-Lewis, 2009; Kavaliauskienė, 2009; Dagiliene, 2012), either based on surveys (questionnaires or interviews) or other research methods, reach similar conclusions, namely that learners in general have a positive attitude towards translation activities and the use of L1, both in EFL and ESP classes, regardless of proficiency level, because these activities help them with the retention and clarification of a wide variety of language issues.

### 3. Materials and methods

The study was represented by a questionnaire containing both open-ended and closed-ended questions. The participants were students from four related academic programs: biology, ecology, agriculture and horticulture. The questionnaires were given to those that attended at least 50% of the English classes over the academic year 2017-2018. The groups were mostly small (10-14 students), but some were larger (25-30 students) (see Table 1); the attendance was approximately 80% per program. The level of English proficiency was mixed, but the biology students were proportionately more advanced than the students in the other three programs, who were mostly lower-intermediate, with a few beginners. The eight questions were meant to offer feedback about the types of translation activities the learners were normally asked to work on in class, how useful they were considered by the students and whether they approved of the occasional use of L1, especially for difficult terminology.

My interest was not to obtain a complex statistical result, but simply to assess my choices of course design and verify whether this type of approach is considered useful and/or pleasant by the students so that I can adjust my approach in the following year. Therefore, I was interested in nuances as well, specifically in their opinions regarding each type of activity in the assessed category. For most questions (five out of eight) the requirement was to choose only one option, while for the other three (questions 2, 7 and 8), the students could choose as many options as they thought necessary.

Table no. 1. Information about the participants

Program	Biology 1 <sup>st</sup> year	Biology 2 <sup>nd</sup> year	Ecology 1 <sup>st</sup> year	Ecology 2 <sup>nd</sup> year	Agriculture 1 <sup>st</sup> year	Horticulture 1 <sup>st</sup> year	Total
No. of students with over 50% attendance	26	25	12	10	13	9	95
No. of students that filled out questionnaires	20	22	8	9	7	9	75

Source: table processed by the author

### 4. Findings

In Question 1 (see Table 2), most subjects chose option c. (over 85%), declaring that the translation activities helped them with a better understanding of specialized English. While little over 13% chose option b., namely they gained little help from translation activities, not a single subject chose option a.

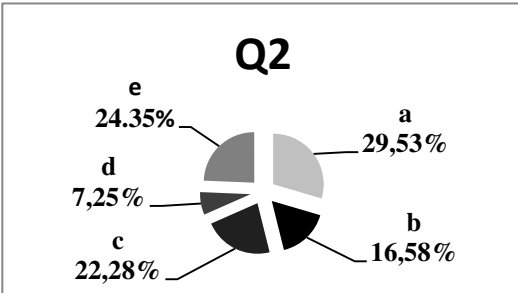
Table no. 2. Question 1 and statistical results

<p><b>Q1.</b> Within each lesson, you were given a few activities that involved translation from Romanian into English and vice-versa. As a whole, how much do you appreciate this kind of activity facilitated the understanding of specialized English (choose one option only): a. not at all; b. little; c. very much</p>	<p>The pie chart for Question 1 shows the distribution of responses. Option 'a' (not at all) represents 0.00% of the total. Option 'b' (little) represents 13.33%. Option 'c' (very much) represents 86.67%.</p>
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Source: Question and chart processed by the author

Question 2 (see Table 3) was open-ended and they had several options to choose from. Their preferences were spread in fairly equal shares among retaining terminology (a. – approximately 30%), understanding the use of other vocabulary issues (c. – over 22%), and English phraseology and sentence organization (e. – over 24%). A smaller percentage chose grammar (b. – over 16%) and ever fewer subjects chose option d. (little over 7%), the understanding of differences between Romanian and English.

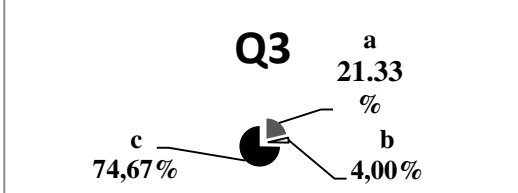
Table no. 3. Question 2 and statistical results

<p><b>Q2.</b> The translation activities within the lessons helped me (choose as many options as you require):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. to retain terminology better</li> <li>b. to understand grammar better</li> <li>c. to understand the use of certain words better (articles, prepositions, conjunctions).</li> <li>d. to understand the differences between Ro and En</li> <li>e. to understand better English phraseology and how to express an idea given the specific organization of the English sentence.</li> </ul>	 <table border="1"> <caption>Q2 Statistical Results</caption> <thead> <tr> <th>Option</th> <th>Percentage</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>a</td> <td>29,53%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>b</td> <td>16,58%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>c</td> <td>22,28%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>d</td> <td>7,25%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>e</td> <td>24,35%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Option	Percentage	a	29,53%	b	16,58%	c	22,28%	d	7,25%	e	24,35%
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Source: Question and chart processed by the author

In Question 3 (see Table 4), option c. was favored (74.67%) over options a. (21%) and b. (4%). Thus, nearly three quarters of responders considered that translation activities helped them with both grammar and vocabulary.

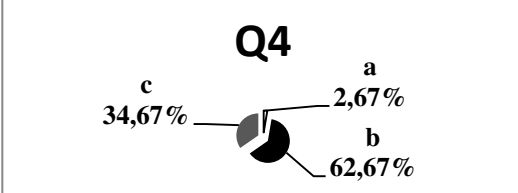
Table no. 4. Question 3 and statistical results

<p><b>Q3.</b> Do you think the translation activities within the lessons helped more with the revision, imprinting and introduction of (choose one option only):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. specialized vocabulary</li> <li>b. grammar</li> <li>c. both vocabulary and grammar</li> </ul>	 <table border="1"> <caption>Q3 Statistical Results</caption> <thead> <tr> <th>Option</th> <th>Percentage</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>a</td> <td>21,33%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>b</td> <td>4,00%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>c</td> <td>74,67%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Option	Percentage	a	21,33%	b	4,00%	c	74,67%
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Source: Question and chart processed by the author

In Question 4 (see Table 5), over half of the responses (62.67%) were in favor of option b., while only 34.67% of the responders believed translation activities helped them improve their knowledge of specialized English more than other types of activities.

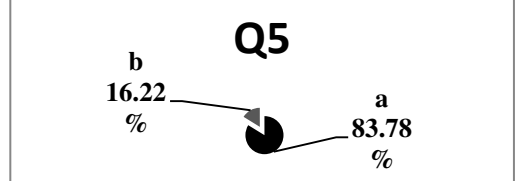
Table no. 5. Question 4 and statistical results

<p><b>Q4.</b> How do you appreciate the usefulness of the translation activities for the improvement of your knowledge of specialized English (choose one option only):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. they helped less than other activities</li> <li>b. they helped as much as other activities</li> <li>c. they helped more than other activities</li> </ul>	 <table border="1"> <caption>Q4 Statistical Results</caption> <thead> <tr> <th>Option</th> <th>Percentage</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>a</td> <td>2,67%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>b</td> <td>62,67%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>c</td> <td>34,67%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Option	Percentage	a	2,67%	b	62,67%	c	34,67%
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Source: Question and chart processed by the author

Question 5 (see Table 6) was, again, closed-ended, and an overwhelming majority (close to 84%) believed that more translation activities would help them improve their knowledge of specialized English.

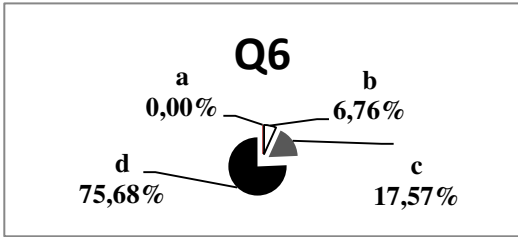
Table no. 6. Question 5 and statistical results

<p><b>Q5.</b> At this moment, the proportion of translation activities within the lessons is between 10 and 15%. Do you think a higher proportion of translation activities will help you improve your knowledge of specialized English? (choose one option only)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Yes</li> <li>b. No</li> </ul>	 <table border="1"> <caption>Q5 Statistical Results</caption> <thead> <tr> <th>Option</th> <th>Percentage</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>a</td> <td>83,78%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>b</td> <td>16,22%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Option	Percentage	a	83,78%	b	16,22%
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a	83,78%						
b	16,22%						

Source: Question and chart processed by the author

Question 6 (see Table 7) was also closed-ended and three quarters of responders (75.68%) chose option d., namely that they both liked translation activities and found them useful. Close to 18% chose option c., which is also a positive choice, while 6.76% acknowledged their usefulness in spite of not necessary liking them.

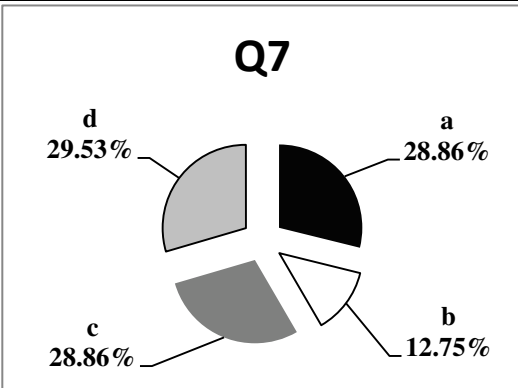
Table no. 7. Question 6 and statistical results

<p><b>Q6.</b> What was your feeling towards this type of activity (translation into and from English and Romanian) compared to other activities? (choose one option only)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. I did not like them, they did not help</li> <li>b. I did not like them but they were useful</li> <li>c. I did not mind them</li> <li>d. I liked them and they were useful</li> </ul>	 <table border="1"> <caption>Data for Q6 Pie Chart</caption> <thead> <tr> <th>Option</th> <th>Percentage</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>a</td> <td>0,00%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>b</td> <td>6,76%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>c</td> <td>17,57%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>d</td> <td>75,68%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Option	Percentage	a	0,00%	b	6,76%	c	17,57%	d	75,68%
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Source: Question and chart processed by the author

Question 7 (see Table 8), like Question 2, was open-ended and the responses were again spread in fairly equal shares among the types of activities they liked. However, while options a., c., and d. displayed very similar percentages (close to 30% each), option b. was less favored (12.75%).

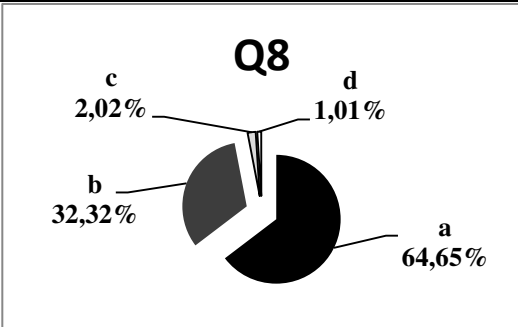
Table no. 8. Question 7 and statistical results

<p><b>Q7.</b> Which type of activity involving Romanian do you think helped you more to retain and understand terminology? (choose as many options as you require)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. to look up the English equivalent for a Romanian term (a list of vocabulary at the end of a text)</li> <li>b. to use certain English phrases from the given text to create, fill in or recognize phrases in Ro</li> <li>c. to translate given phrases or sentences that involved the specialized vocabulary presented within the respective lesson</li> <li>d. to revise the terminology at the end of each lesson using the exact equivalent Ro-En</li> </ul>	 <table border="1"> <caption>Data for Q7 Pie Chart</caption> <thead> <tr> <th>Option</th> <th>Percentage</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>a</td> <td>28,86%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>b</td> <td>12,75%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>c</td> <td>28,86%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>d</td> <td>29,53%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Option	Percentage	a	28,86%	b	12,75%	c	28,86%	d	29,53%
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Source: Question and chart processed by the author

Question 8 (see Table 9), like Questions 2 and 7, was open-ended and concerned with the use of L1 in the ESP class. The results were overwhelmingly inclined towards the usefulness of getting either an explanation or the exact equivalent of a specialized word in L1. Only one and two responders, respectively, chose options d. (2%) or c. (1%), and they belonged to the more advanced groups (Biology 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year).

Table no. 9. Question 8 and statistical results

<p><b>Q8.</b> How do you appreciate the use of Romanian within the lessons? (choose as many options as you require)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. I find it useful when the teacher first explains a specialized term in Romanian</li> <li>b. I find it more useful when the teacher gives me the exact equivalent into Romanian</li> <li>c. I prefer and find it more helpful to be given the explanation in English</li> <li>d. I do not approve of the use of Romanian within the English lessons;</li> </ul>	 <table border="1"> <caption>Data for Q8 Pie Chart</caption> <thead> <tr> <th>Option</th> <th>Percentage</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>a</td> <td>64,65%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>b</td> <td>32,32%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>c</td> <td>2,02%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>d</td> <td>1,01%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Option	Percentage	a	64,65%	b	32,32%	c	2,02%	d	1,01%
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## 5. Conclusions

The results were favorable given the premise, in that the majority of participants found the translation activities useful for the improvement of their knowledge of English, and also even enjoyable. High percentages resulted from questions 1, 6, 3, 5 and 8, where the participants declared that these types of activities involving translations and L1 helped them very much in general (86.67%), that they found them both useful and enjoyable (75.68%), that the activities

helped with both grammar and vocabulary (74.67%), that they would like the classes to contain even more such activities (83.78%), and that it was useful to get an explanation or an exact equivalent in L1 for specialized words and difficult vocabulary items (96.97%), regardless of proficiency level. The results of the open-ended questions were spread rather equally among the options given, with most responders choosing at least two possibilities, namely types of activities they found helpful (question 7) or specifically what these activities promoted (question 2): understanding of terminology, grammar, phraseology, the use of function and content words, or the differences between L1 and L2. Given the positive results obtained from all the other questions, a rather surprising outcome can be observed in question 4, where over half of the responders (62.67%) did not see translation activities as more conducive to the improvement of their knowledge of English when compared to other activities, but equally helpful. However, only 2.67% picked option a., namely that these activities were less helpful than others.

Among the limitations of this study I would refer to the small number of participants per program in some cases and also to the complexity of the open-ended questions. Unfortunately, the reality is that the groups are generally small in some programs and that is an objective condition. However, the total number of participants is relevant for the assessment. As far as the two open-ended questions are concerned, I needed specific feedback from my students so that I can adapt the type of activities for the future. However, the conclusion is that the feedback was generally positive and encouraging, and it came as additional evidence for the studies cited earlier that count both translations, as a language learning device, and the use of L1, in EFL classes in general and ESP classes in particular, as preferred by learners and very useful for the improvement of their English proficiency.

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