
APPLYING TRANSLATION TECHNIQUES IN ACQUIRING VOCABULARY IN EAP: A CASE IN TEACHING MEDICAL BACHELORS

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Abstract: With the dominance of the communicative approach in teaching English as a Foreign Language over the past several decades, translation as a mode of instruction has been excluded from the methodological rationale. Using translation was considered even harmful, as the predominant understanding among experts in the field was that translating is not conducive to thinking in the target language (L2). However, recent studies of some translation techniques in the field have shown the viability of learning core vocabulary especially terms and terminological multiword expressions in the mother tongue. That is true to a large extent for teaching English for Specific Purposes and particularly for teaching English for Academic Purposes. In the university settings, especially in former Eastern European countries, Bulgaria included in that number, the insufficient number of school hours has necessitated the use of flexible approaches to teaching English. This is in line with the main goal of teaching English for Academic Purposes – the best possible acquisition of new vocabulary by undergraduate students. This paper delves into the problem of the effectiveness of using translation techniques in teaching terminology to undergraduate bachelor students in the medical professions. The study's premise included testing and surveying two groups in the speciality of assistant pharmacists at the Medical College of the Medical University of Plovdiv, Bulgaria. Each group consisted of twelve students of similar levels in English, ascertained via a diagnostic test at baseline as being lower intermediate A2/ intermediate/B1 according to CEFR. One of the groups served as the control one and the other as the experimental one. The experiment consisted of teaching vocabulary items from a unit in a specialized textbook. The control group was provided with explanations in English only, while the experimental group had the terms and expressions explained in English and translated into Bulgarian. A test and a questionnaire were performed at the end of the experiment. The test, which covered randomly selected terms from the unit, showed that the experimental group fared slightly better than the control one. The questionnaire, given with some variance to both groups, showed that students do prefer to translate the terms and expressions, but also are aware of the fact that not all terminology can be adequately translated, so it cannot supersede entirely definitions and explanations in the foreign language. Therefore, it can be concluded that translation plays a crucial role in the cognitive processes of understanding EAP vocabulary in the target language. The current study corroborates findings by scholars from many countries. As a follow-up, it will be informative to gauge the effectiveness of the use of L1 (the mother tongue) in the explanation of grammar issues in L2 (the foreign language).

Keywords: EAP, translation, vocabulary, test, questionnaire

1. INTRODUCTION

It is beyond doubt that teaching English for Academic Purposes requires flexible approaches focusing on acquiring specific skills which target the professional career paths of undergraduate students. That statement does not question the paramount importance that the four skills in language learning hold. However, the communicative approach, which has been the dominant methodology in foreign language learning over the last decades, should not be considered a panacea, as it cannot always be applied to all learning environments to fulfil the learners' specific needs. In turn, translation and the search for precise equivalence have been frowned upon in English language teaching approaches lately, having been categorized as outdated and nonconductive to the modern classroom. In EAP, though, the exact meaning of words, phrases or collocations reign supreme as professionals in various fields of work, be it medicine, economics, science and technology or law, need accuracy above all. What also matters are the specific conditions in which the learning process takes place. It is common knowledge that the adequate acquisition of the four skills demands time and preliminary preparation. Each skill, be it speaking, reading, listening or writing, requires a lot of time to master and prior experience acquired at the secondary school. That is not always the case with Bulgarian students, who come to university ill-prepared to take a more active role in the classroom as the communicative approach stipulates. What is more, undergraduate students have a different learning agenda from the common users of a foreign language, as the former needs some more specific skills which could be useful for them in their studies and beyond. All this comes to prove that teachers in EAP courses have to be fairly adaptive if they have to reach their goals, ie. achieve the best possible outcomes in English language learning under the given

circumstances. From this perspective, any teaching technique applied with care and measure can be favourable and applicable.

Translation is one such technique, which according to Weshler (1997) and other scholars (Krashen, 1985; Cook, 2013; Hall & Cook, 2013; Kerr, 2019) is perceived as an effective tool in teaching foreign languages, especially ESP. Since the close of the 20th century, there has been a renaissance of curiosity in the use of Translation and L1 in foreign language teaching (Dagiliene, 2012; Malmkjaer, 1998). Recently researchers have been paying close attention to using L1 in ESP classrooms, and translation has begun to be recognised as a valuable method in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) (Fernández-Guerra, 2014; Chirobocea, 2018; Kic-Drgas, 2014; Leonardi, 2009). Dudley-Evans and St. John (2012) maintain that while discussing the issue of teaching and learning ESP through translation, the learners' needs must be considered when designing a course. Materials, teaching, and learning methods are selected based on the students'/learners' needs. When it comes to learning specialized terminology, translation is even more conducive to facilitating the students' cognitive abilities than the gruesome task of delving into term definitions. Furthermore, Avand (2009) holds that activities that utilise translation as a medium of instruction for particular and specialised lessons simplify the understanding of sophisticated segments of the lessons. Additionally, as far as ESP is concerned, the usage of L2 only in delivering courses that are complicated and sophisticated may put the learners in stressful situations; hence, the inclusion of L1 while delivering the lesson in the form of translation may relieve the tension from the learners and help in clarifying vague lessons linked to specialised classes (Kic-Drgas, 2014). Mažeikienė (2018), summarizing the most important arguments in favour of translation in ESP teaching, also observes that translation in the ESP context can be seen as a communicative activity, which, if properly balanced, well-planned and tailored to the specific needs and profiles of learners, becomes an efficient teaching/learning method (Dudley-Evans & St. John 2012: 4).

This paper aims to gauge the effectiveness of translation in ESP settings concerning teaching specialized vocabulary to bachelor medical students.

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study was conducted in the 2022/2023 school year with first-year students at the Medical College at the Medical University of Plovdiv. As a preliminary note, it has to be mentioned that English as a Foreign Language is taught only in the first year of a three-year course of a medical bachelor's degree at the college in the frame of 60 school hours. The sample of the study included testing and surveying two groups in the speciality of assistant pharmacist, each one consisting of twelve students of similar levels of English, ascertained via a diagnostic test as being lower intermediate A2/ intermediate/B1 according to CEFR. One of the groups in the study served as the *control group* and the other as *the experimental group*. Table 1 shows the levels of proficiency of each group at baseline.

Table 1. Levels of proficiency of each group at baseline

Group	A1 level – number of students	A2 level - number of students	B1 level - number of students
<i>control</i>	1	4	7
<i>experimental</i>	1	5	6

Source: The Author

The premise of the study involved the comprehension of the specialized vocabulary of one unit from a textbook (Dagnev, 2021) taught over three school hours. The unit is entitled “Illness and Disease” and targets various terms relating to diseases, medical states and their concomitant symptoms. The study focused on one text, entitled “Disease” and on one section dubbed “Topical vocabulary” encompassing 97 terms and multiword expressions all relating to the topic. Some examples include words such as *ailment, malady, sickness, illness, disorder, distemper, communicable disease, acquired immunity, recognizable symptoms, warning mechanism, un/productive cough, etc.* The only means of term disambiguation for the *control group* was conducted through explanation in L2, involving category definitions and various types of exercises and excluding translation of any kind. The *experimental group* was granted the same methodological approach but translation of terms from L2 into L1 was also present where appropriate. At the end of the unit, a test was given to the students reviewing twenty of the abovementioned terms and multiword expressions. The test included 12 multiple-choice questions, five fill-in-the-gap ones and three True/False ones. The results of the test are presented in Table 2, given the Bulgarian scoring system which posits 6

as the highest score and 2 as the lowest one (failed). After the test, the students filled in a questionnaire asking for their opinions on the applied translation method and translation of terms as a whole.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

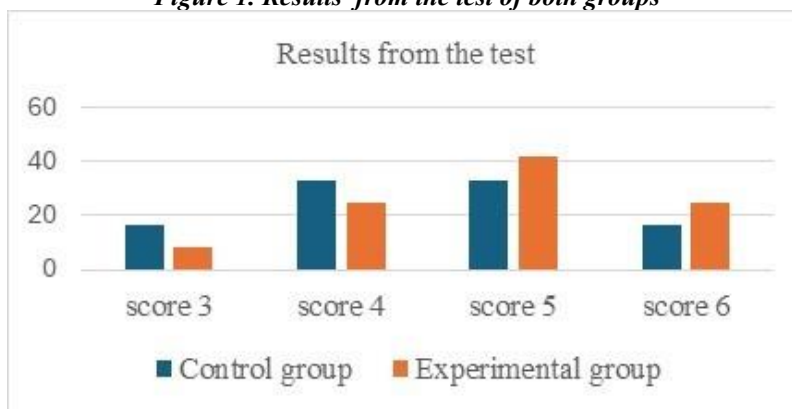
Table 2 presents the results of the test on the reviewed vocabulary items.

Group	Score 6 (80% or more)	Score 5 (70 % to 79%)	Score 4 (55% - 69%)	Score 3 (40% - 54%)	Score 2 (failed) (below 40%)
	Number of students	Number of students	Number of students	Number of students	Number of students
<i>control</i>	2	4	4	2	-
<i>experimental</i>	3	5	3	1	-

Source: The Author

Table 2 clearly indicates that the students in the *experimental group* fared slightly better than the ones in the *control group*. Eight students in the *experimental group* scored five or six (the top score), while students in the *control group* had results evenly distributed along the scoreline. Figure 1 juxtaposes the percentages of scores of both groups.

Figure 1. Results from the test of both groups



Source: The Author

As far as the questionnaire is concerned, the first three questions were asked only to students of the *experimental group* as it aimed to ascertain their attitude toward using translation as a viable method of teaching. The fourth question, which was a YES/NO one, was asked to both groups. Part of the questionnaire was prepared in the Likert Scale from the most to the least significant value (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree) and part with close YES or NO questions.

Table 3. Answers of students to the first question in the questionnaire.

Question 1.	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Do you think that the translation of terms and phrases helped you better understand them?	5	6	1	-

Source: The Author

It can be deduced from the answers to this question that the students in their enormity consider translation of terms and multiword expressions as useful.

Table 4. Answers of students to the second question in the questionnaire.

Question 2.	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Do you think that without translating all the terms and phrases their meaning is clear enough?	1	2	8	1

Source: The Author

Table 4 also strongly suggests that students view translations of specialized vocabulary as mandatory and believe that without learning the word or phrase in L1, they would not understand it correctly.

Table 5. Answers of students to the third question in the questionnaire

Question 3	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Do you think that only translation of terms and phrases is enough to understand their meaning?	3	4	4	1

Source: The Author

Question 3 suggests that students were unsure whether terms and specialized multiword expressions could be rendered accurately only through translating them. This is a thorny issue as there are such terms that cannot be understood only by translating them, as their semasiological value cannot be covered fully by a local term. For example, words such as *malady*, *distemper*, *sickness* or *illness*, cannot be fully understood without some sort of explanation and disambiguation provided by definition or numerous examples.

Fig. 2. Breakdown of the answers of the students from both groups to question 4.



Source: The Author

The fourth question from the questionnaire was addressed to both groups and concurs with the results obtained from question 3 i.e. students are not content with simply translating a term, as they are aware that there is not always a one-to-one correspondence between a term in L1 and L2 and also there are terms which cannot be translated properly.

4. DISCUSSION

Overall, the results from the study indicate that students do choose to mentally process terms and expressions in their mother tongue, but are aware of the limitations of this process. Therefore, it can be concluded that translation plays a crucial role in the cognitive processes of understanding EAP vocabulary in L2. The current study corroborates findings by scholars such as Galante (2021), Kaivanpanah et al (2021), Mažeikienė (2018), Stojković (2021), Boukranaa & Sandy (2024) and others.

5. CONCLUSION

Although fairly limited in scope the study does assert the importance of translation as a viable mode of teaching English for Special Purposes and in particular English for Academic Purposes. Students do find it easier to include translation of vocabulary items in the learning process, which in turn facilitates the classroom activities. Given the short period of learning EAP, any means of study that makes it easier and clearer deserves attention. As a follow-up, it may be considered useful to gauge the use of L1 in defining grammatical issues in L2 as part of a broader approach including defining the abovementioned issues in L2, accompanied by a lot of exercises.

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