

(Re)Defining translation in EFL classrooms: Comments on Sakurai (2015)

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Nobuko Sakurai (2015) presents insightful research results that help us better understand the impact of translation as it limits reading quantity, reading comprehension, and reading rate in an extensive reading (ER) program. Overall, the results of the study encourage educators to restrict translation as a means of obtaining better results when using ER. However, there are two controversial issues raised in this study that are redefining how students should be taught to read in English: (a) the influence of the ever-growing discourse of grammar-translation as an outdated and ineffective method and (b) the role of the first language (L1) in the English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) classroom. These views are explained by the context of Sakurai's research, where policy is the driving force that is redefining EFL practices in schools throughout Japan, moving toward communicative instruction. To an even greater extent, the study reinforces the notion that the grammar-translation method is ineffective, and consequently, it portrays the debilitating effect of referencing the L1 in the learning process. Nevertheless, what we should not lose sight of is that not all forms of translation imply the practice of the grammar-translation method. Furthermore, use of the L1 can enhance the learning of the target language. Translation or skills-based learning have been found to be as effective as ER, where both have the potential to produce positive results in the incidental learning of English (Lee, Schallert, & Kim, 2015; Robb & Susser, 1989).

Sakurai's literature review highlights the various limitations of translation that hinder reading, but it fails to acknowledge the benefits of translation. Rather than envisioning translation as a detrimental activity, one should acknowledge that it is an innate process, a natural tendency among language learners as they begin to negotiate meaning. While restricting translation can help students improve their reading skills at a macro level, focusing on the text as a whole; it does little to reinforce reading skills at the micro level. One could say that is the purpose of ER overall, focusing on the big picture while hoping to catch minute nuances in the process. As a result, one can only invite researchers and educators alike to ponder on the following statement: Does the restriction and ultimate elimination of translation from ER jeopardize other activities that are conducive to language learning and the refinement of reading skills?

With the ER method described by Sakurai, a student is expected to comprehend the reading through context, focusing more on the greater picture instead of the details and subsequently, as the amounts of reading increase, comprehension will improve in the long term. Indeed, ER research has come to show that the more students read and engage with vocabulary, the less need students have for dictionaries and translation as they guess meaning from context (Alzu'bi, 2014; Brown, 2000; Koch, 2009). Nevertheless, what is sacrificed through the restriction of translation

is the verification of the meaning that the student may ascribe to a word or sentence that he or she may be unfamiliar with. However, such a limitation can be compensated with translation. For instance, Barcroft (2015) found that incidental vocabulary learning could be achieved through translation. This result was possible because target words were accompanied by a translation the first time they appeared in the text and subsequent appearances of the words were represented with a blank space and the translation beside, requiring the student to retrieve the word in the second language (L2).

Restricting translation might also pose another barrier for a student who simply reads from one text to the next, overlooking underlying language deficiencies or limitations in the L1. We often assume that students have mastery of their L1, yet this may not always be the case. Oftentimes students are unable to grasp concepts in English because they are unfamiliar with the concept in the L1. If the student is unable to comprehend an idea in the text and overlooks this limitation with the expectation of grasping its meaning later and fails to do so, then a language learning opportunity could have been lost, not just in the L2 but the L1 as well. Enabling students to translate allows them to develop awareness of language transfer, focusing on connections between the L1 and L2. Such awareness allows them to self-assess their comprehension and learning by verifying if their perceptions of the reading are correct, avoiding mistakes they may have overlooked in their reading (Dagilienė, 2012; Karimian & Talebinejad, 2013). Furthermore, since students are expected to read independently in an ER program without the immediate interaction of an educator, self-assessment would seem to be vital for the identification of these limitations which could adversely affect comprehension and delay language transfer.

While Sakurai's research has shed light on how to employ ER more effectively, it has also given us a lot to think about regarding dominant tendencies or practices in EFL classrooms and the growing pressure and impact of language-in-education policies. Educators should be aware that translation is not an ineffective practice. They should not disregard translation from EFL classrooms and should exercise caution against this bias. One cannot disregard that translation is a resource that allows students to be more comfortable in their interactions with English, where the L1 provides them some degree of security which counteracts the anxiety of making sense of the unknown (Karimian & Talebinejad, 2013). Therefore, translation, like many other learning methods and strategies, should be explored as part of a greater repertoire of resources that educators and students can engage with to meet learning goals. In sum, translation in EFL classrooms could aid students in their learning by producing positive attitudes and high levels of motivation; but it is more a matter of orchestrating and designing proper activities that help strengthen not just grammar but fluency in general (Fernández-Guerra, 2014; Yamashita, 2013).

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