

## Translation as an aid to enhance Students' Writing Skills at University Level

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### **ABSTRACT :**

This study aims to identify the role of translation in the enhancement of writing skills of English language learners in general, and translation in particular at Universities. Translators need good writing skills to perform well in their jobs. Good writing skills are needed in each of the three main stages of a translation, namely, decoding the source text, transferring linguistic and cultural elements and meanings into the target language and encoding the text into the new language and context. Writing skills are extremely important for students who are studying in the university to become professional translators. For this, you need to know your mother tongue language perfectly: grammar, vocabulary, style. Translation into the native language implies that the source text (ST) is the 'foreign' element to work on and, in this case, 'the translator runs into the problem of analysis. On the other hand, translating into L2 means that the target text will be the foreign element to deal with and 'here, the translator runs into the problem of synthesis. Many scholars and researchers agree upon the fact that translating from L2 into L1 is more reliable and natural practice due to a better linguistic and cultural competence in L1. In both cases, it enhances students writing skills in L1 and L2.

**Keywords:** *Transferring, Context, Enhancement.*

### **المستخلص :**

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحديد دور الترجمة في ترقية مهارات الكتابة لطلاب اللغة الإنجليزية بصفة عامة، وطلاب الترجمة على وجه الخصوص في الجامعات. ويحتاج المترجمون إلى مهارات جيدة في الكتابة لكي يؤدون عملهم بالطريقة المثلى، وتكون الحاجة لمهارات الكتابة الجيدة في كل من المراحل الرئيسة للترجمة، والمتمثلة في: فهم لغة النص، ونقل العناصر اللغوية والثقافية والمعنى إلى لغة الهدف، إضافةً إلى إعادة صياغة النص إلى لغة الهدف وسياقتها. إن مهارات الكتابة مهمة جداً للطلاب الذين يدرسون بالجامعة لكي يصبحون مترجمون محترفون، لذلك فإنهم يحتاجون لإتقان لغتهم الأم، بما فيها من قواعد ومفردات وأساليب. إن الترجمة إلى اللغة الأم تعني أن النص الأصلي هو عنصر أجنبي للعمل عليه، وتواجه المترجم - في هذه الحالة - مشكلة التحليل؛ وعلى صعيد آخر إن الترجمة إلى اللغة الثانية أو الأجنبية تعني أن لغة الهدف عنصر أجنبي للتعامل معه، وتواجه المترجم - في هذه الحالة - مشكلة التركيب. إتفق عدد من العلماء والباحثون على حقيقة أن الترجمة من اللغة الثانية أو الأجنبية إلى اللغة الأم تكون أكثر فعالية وسلاسة في ممارستها، ويعزى ذلك إلى الكفاءة اللغوية والثقافية الأفضل في اللغة الأم؛ وفي كلا الحالتين فإن الترجمة تعمل على ترقية مهارات الكتابة لدى الطلاب في اللغتين (اللغة الأم واللغة الثانية أو الأجنبية).

**المصطلحات المفتاحية:** *التحويل - السياق - التحسين.*

## INTRODUCTION :

A translation, by its very definition, is a transposition of a text from one language (the source language or SL) into another (the target language or TL). Also Catford (1988) defined translation as the replacement of textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent textual material in other language (TL). A distinction is indeed made between translators who work with the written word and interpreters who work with the spoken word. Translators need good writing skills to perform well in their jobs. Good writing skills are needed in each of the three main stages of a translation, namely, decoding the ST, transferring linguistic and cultural elements and meanings into the TL and encoding the text into the new language and context. Translation, just like any other piece of writing, has a flow and a rhythm. It should reproduce both the style and the context of the original text and respect the TL writing conventions. For instance, many Romance languages are characterized by very long sentences and paragraphs which, inevitably, need to be shortened in English without losing or changing the style, the context or the 'flavor' of the original text. Writing skills are generally taught in most foreign language courses and there is always a need to refer to focus, organization, elaboration, style and conventions. The same applies to translation and therefore the use of translation as a way to enhance writing skills is perfectly justified. Moreover, if the task is approached from a contrastive perspective, students have the opportunity to see and evaluate similarities and differences between different writing styles in different

languages. They will end up with parallel texts where a contrastive analysis can be carried out. Furthermore, writing skills can be enhanced through the use of written commentaries where students have the opportunity to write about all the difficulties encountered when translating the passage and the strategies used in order to deal with them. Writing skills are extremely important for students who are studying in the university to become professional translators. For this, you need to know your own language perfectly: grammar, vocabulary, style. Reading voraciously helps them, so will write practice such as blogging, student journalism, creative writing. Even the little things like spelling are important. Spelling is really important for university students generally and translator in particular; bad spelling can give a really bad impression to clients. For those of you, who think you know it all, try the ultimate fiendish Oxford dictionaries spelling test (Shahvali, 1997). It is obvious that the majority of students at university level face many difficulties when using English language to transferring the meaning from one language into another or from culture into another. This is due to the fact that most of those students are ignorant of the basic rules of writing skills and how to write well in English using the fundamental skills. No wonder these students with this limited knowledge, face many difficulties when writing in English or in Arabic language. It was noticed that some learners don't care too much about the differences in grammar and style between languages when they translate from the source language into the target

language. This study is an attempt to contribute in solving some of the problems of practicing writing skills at University level through enhancing translation process. Besides, the study is intended to draw the learners' attention to the importance of studying cultural aspects of the target language before translating. The study also may have great benefits not only to those who are involved in teaching and learning English as a foreign language or as a second language, but also syllabus designers and researchers may get the most out of this research.

#### **Translation as the fundamental writing process**

The common thread underlying the evolution from cave dwellers using written marks to elite scribes to a class of professional writers to universal writers, who are writing readers, is the human capability to translate ideas and thoughts in the mind into written symbols and messages and thus express ideas in written language. Although translation has long been thought to be one of a few key cognitive processes in writing, in this topic we boldly propose for consideration the view that translation is the fundamental cognitive process of writing. The four cognitive processes in the Hayes and Flower's (1980) model – planning, translating, reviewing and revising – may be the higher-level executive functions of brain that regulate communication across many mental processes involving different brain systems not only for writing but also for many other functions (Berninger & Richards, 2002). We acknowledge that skilled translation requires ability to plan the content or methods of translation, review what is

written so far, and when problems are detected in translation, repair them through retranslation. However, sometimes writing may not draw on planning processes and exhibit only flow knowledge telling (Galbraith, 2009), or may not draw on reviewing and revising (e.g. no knowledge transformation for audience). Writing always requires, as a minimum, some translation (transformation of one or more cognitive representations into written language), whether or not it is planned, reviewed, or revised.

#### **Academic writing skills**

Academic Writing is designed for anybody who is studying (or planning to study) at English-medium colleges and universities and has to write essays and other assignments for exams or coursework. International students especially find the written demands of their courses extremely challenging. On top of the complexity of the vocabulary of academic English they have to learn a series of conventions in style, referencing and organization. Academic Writing is a flexible course that allows students to work either with a teacher or by themselves, to practice those areas which are most important for their studies. Many students find that they have very limited time to prepare for their courses, and that writing is only one of several skills they need to master. Skills are developed from writing at the paragraph level, through organizing the various sections of an essay, to discussing statistics and describing charts. Writing Process guides students from the initial stage of understanding an essay title, through reading and note-making, to the organization of an essay and the final

stage of proof-reading. Elements of writing deal with the key skills that are needed for all the types of assignments, such as making definitions and giving references which is organized alphabetically. Accuracy in writing gives remedial practice in those areas that students tend to find most confusing, such as definite articles and relative pronouns, again in alphabetical order. Writing models gives examples of the types of writing that students commonly need, including letters and survey reports (Farahzad, 1998). Writers seeking to improve their academic writing skills should focus their efforts on three key areas:

1. Strong writing: Thinking precedes writing. Good writers spend time distilling information from their sources and reviewing major points before creating their work. Writing detailed outlines helps many students organize their thoughts. Strong academic writing begins with solid planning.

2. Excellent grammar: Learn the major and minor points of grammar. Spend time practicing writing and seek the detailed feedback from teachers, professors or writers you respect. English grammar can be detailed and complex but strong writers command the major points after many years of study and practice. Using a good writing reference, such as Advanced Oxford Dictionary can provide advice on the more troublesome points of grammar. Proper punctuation use and good proofreading skills improve academic writing as well.

3. Consistent stylistic approach: Whether your university or employer requires use of the manual styles, choose one style and stick to it. Each of these style sheets

provide guidance on how to write out numbers, references, citations, etc... All are available at your local bookseller in hard copy or online (Lotfipour, 1997).

#### **Translational word lists for students**

Transitional word lists are important for students to have when learning to write. Transitional words are used in writing to link paragraphs, sentences and ideas. This linkage using verbs, adverbs, conjunctions or prepositional phrases adds to the clarity and complexity of writing and serves to better communicate the message being transmitted by the writer. The following examples of transitional words are presented in different categories and show that transitional words can be used in and between sentences, as well as between paragraphs.

#### **Translators as professional writers**

A good translator is someone who has a comprehensive knowledge of both source and target languages. Students should read different genres in both source and target languages including modern literature, contemporary prose, newspapers, magazines, advertisements, announcements, instructions, etc. Being familiar with all these genres is important, since they implicitly transfer culture-specific aspects of a language. Specialized readings are also suggested: reading recently published articles and journals on theoretical and practical aspects of translation. The articles will not only improve the students' reading skill in general, but also give them insights which will subconsciously be applied when actually translating. "Writing" skills, i.e. the ability to write smoothly and correctly in both source and target languages, are also

important. Writing is in fact the main job of a translator. Students should become familiar with different styles of writing and techniques and principles of editing and punctuation in both source and target languages. Editing and punctuation improve the quality and readability of the translation (Razmjou, 2002). Moreover, translation trainees should have a good ear for both source and target languages; i.e. they should be alert to pick up various expressions, idioms, and specific vocabulary and their uses, and store them in their minds to be used later. This is in fact what we call improving one's "intuition." Intuition is not something to be developed in a vacuum; rather, it needs practice and a solid background. It needs both the support of theory and the experience of practice. Language intuition is a must for a competent translator. One of the most important points to consider in the act of translating is that understanding the value of the source text within the framework of the source-language discourse. To develop this understanding, the translator must be aware of the cultural differences and the various discourse strategies in the source and target languages. Therefore, the hidden structure of the source text should be discovered through the use of various discourse strategies by the translator. A good translator should be familiar with the culture, customs, and social settings of the source and target language speakers. He/she should also be familiar with different registers, styles of speaking, and social stratification of both languages. This socio-cultural awareness, can improve the quality of the students' translations to a great extent. According to Hatim and Mason (1990), the social

context in translating a text is probably a more important variable than its genre. The act of translating takes place in the socio-cultural context. Consequently, it is important to judge translating activity only within a social context. After developing a good competence in both source and target languages, actual translating may begin. But there is a middle stage between the competence-developing stage and actual translating: becoming aware of various information-providing sources and learning how to use them. These sources include: different monolingual and bilingual dictionaries, encyclopedias, and the Internet. Using dictionaries is a technical skill in itself. Not all students know how to use dictionaries appropriately. Words have different meanings in different contexts, and usually monolingual dictionaries are of utmost value in this regard. Students need a great deal of practice to find the intended meaning of words in a particular context, using monolingual dictionaries. While there is a strong emphasis on developing source and target language competencies, the *ways* in which students can develop them should not be neglected. Group work and cooperation with peers can always lead the translating process to better results. Students who practice translation with their peers will be able to solve problems more easily and will also more rapidly develop self-confidence and decision-making techniques (Razmjou, 2002). Although there is a possibility of making mistakes during group work, the experience of making, detecting, and correcting mistakes will make the students' minds open and alert. Another important point is that successful



translators usually choose one specific kind of texts for translating and continue to work only in that area; for example a translator might translate only literary works, scientific books, or journalistic texts. Even while translating literary works, some translators might choose only to translate poetry, short stories, or novels. Even more specific than that, some translators choose a particular author and translate only her or his works. The reason is that the more they translate the works of a particular author, the more they will become familiar with her or his mind, way of thinking, and style of writing. And the more familiar is the translator with the style of a writer, the better the translation will be. Translation needs to be practiced in an academic environment in which trainees work on both practical tasks under the supervision of their teachers and theoretical aspects to enhance their knowledge. In an academic environment, recently published articles, journals and books on translation are available to the trainees, who thus become familiar with good translators and their work by reading them and then comparing them with the original texts. In this way, trainees will develop their power of observation, insight, and decision-making, which in turn will lead them to enhance their motivation and improve their translating skills. Therefore, translation studies have now been recognized as an important discipline and have become an independent major, separate from foreign-language studies, in universities. This reflects the recognition of the fact that not everybody who knows a foreign language can be a translator, as it is commonly and mistakenly believed.

Translation is the key to international understanding. So in this vast world of communication and information overload, we need competent translators who have both the theoretical knowledge and practical skills to do their jobs well. The importance of theoretical knowledge lies in the fact that it helps translators acquire an understanding of how linguistic choices in texts reflect other relationships between senders and receivers, such as power relationships, and how texts are sometimes used to maintain or create social inequalities (Fairclough, 1989). When it comes to improving your translation skills, the natural reaction is often to devote additional hours to that all-important source language savvy. However, despite the undoubted centrality of this skill set, there remains another area that is often inexplicably relegated to an afterthought in translator training in spite of its overwhelming importance: the ability to write well in your target language. Indeed, given the widespread nature of the misguided assumption that bilingualism equates to good translation, newcomers to the industry could almost be forgiven for thinking that foreign language skills are the important points of translation excellence. But it's not that simple. Translation is a product-oriented activity and, as such, your hours of hard work take the form of a target language text that is often used as the sole indicator of your ability. Quite simply, it doesn't matter if you understood the source text perfectly if you can't convey that mastery into your target language.

#### **Writing for translation**

These are a few tips for writing content that will eventually be translated.

### 1. Avoid culturally specific reference –

Use plain English to make your point. Don't use baseball metaphors. Why don't you use "make an outstanding contribution" rather than "hitting a homerun?" And, please, let a "match made in heaven" simply be a "perfect combination."

### 2. Use 3-letter ISO currency codes –

Many countries use "\$" to mean their currency. The best way to keep things straight and ensure that the translation is not going to change the price of your product is to use ISO 4217 codes, like USD for United States dollars, HKD for Hong Kong dollars or EUR for the Euros.

### 3. Don't use hard returns....please! –

Most translation vendors and individual translators use translation tools that allow them to parse your document into sentences or phrases. These segments are then matched to translation memories or used to create new translation memory. In order to allow your translation teams to make use of this standard technology in a way that limits errors and gives you the biggest discount for reusing previously translated content, it is critical that you never use hard returns to force a line break in the middle of a sentence. Similarly, if you are using a layout program like In Design make use of the built in text flow functionality for splitting sentences and paragraphs into movable units in the layout. Do not create a new text box and move half of a sentence into it. This may seem obvious, but you would be surprised how often this kind of thing happens.

### 4. Place your modifier in the right place –

This is best explained via an example.

**Wrong:** "Our goal is to offer multiple fragrance options to our customers that

smell great." **Right:** "Our goal is to offer our customers multiple fragrance options that smell great"

The modifier "that smell great" needs to follow its referent, "fragrances," or you risk a translation that pays tribute to your customer's pleasant aroma rather than the quality of your products.

**5. Avoid mnemonic devices –** They simply won't work in other languages (unless you have a brilliantly creative team of linguists to create a new mnemonic device in the target language). Seriously, mnemonic devices are virtually impossible to translate effectively while retaining the power of the device. In the end you just create confusion and make your organization look like it is imposing American-style learning on people from other cultures.

An increased professional concern in teaching writing skills has manifested itself by a number of publications in this area since the 1980s. Issues related to the teaching of writing and to the research findings on the writing of non-native speakers are of a particular interest to linguists and teachers, who claim that one of the most valuable and essential skills is the ability to write accurately, briefly and clearly.

There is an obvious link between reading and writing: they are interdependent and reciprocal processes, both are personal and social activities, which naturally intersect in the process of learning (Kavaliauskienė, 2004). It is claimed that knowledge of genre is a key element in all communication and especially significant in writing academic or professional texts (Dudley-Evans et al, 1998). Developing writing skills involves skills of planning, drafting and revising

so that the end product is appropriate both to the purpose of the writing and the intended readership. Moreover, writing is a difficult and tiring activity and usually needs time for reflection and revision, plus a peaceful environment, none of which are generally available in the classroom. The productive skill of writing differs from productive skill of speaking. Writing has to be both coherent and cohesive. Coherent writing makes sense because you can follow the sequence of ideas and points. Cohesion is a more technical matter since here we concentrate on the various linguistic ways of connecting ideas across phrases and sentences (Harmer, 2001). There are certain conventions that have to be followed in writing. Such rules and conventions are not written down anywhere, nor are they easy to define. Rules for writing range from the so called netiquette of computer users to the accepted patterns or conventions in different genres. It means that a different level of formality is used, which is sometimes described as distance or closeness. There are a number of reasons why students find language production difficult: students do not have the minimum language to perform a task; there is no spontaneity in writing; the topic or genre might create some difficulties. Furthermore, conventions in ones native language are frequently non-transferable to a second language (Harmer, 2001). The ability to summarize comprises important part of writing. In education summarizing is invaluable: learners have to sum up reading assignments, lecture notes, articles, etc. on a daily basis. The ability to write an effective summary might be the most

important writing skill. Students need to be able to summarize before they can be successful at the other kinds of writing. The goal of summarizing is an accurate and concise presentation of the originals key points and ability to generalize. Some learners assume that summarizing a text is a relatively easy task, but essentially it is not, basically because writing involves some complex abilities. Reading comprehension is one of the necessary abilities (Kavaliauskienė, 2004).

#### **Translation from L1 into L2 and vice versa**

Translation was an important part of English language teaching for a long time, but it has been abandoned since communicative methodologies became dominant. Interestingly, although translation was out of favour with English language practitioners, it has rather stubbornly refused to die in the teaching of languages other than English (Cook, 2007).

Major objections to using translation in language teaching can be summarised as follows. First, translation does not help students develop communication skills. Second, it encourages using L1 instead of L2. Third, translation activities may be suitable for students who prefer analytical or verbal-linguistic learning strategies. Finally, translation is a difficult skill which is not always rewarding. The benefits of translation activities include practice of all language skills, i.e. reading, writing, speaking and listening. In terms of communicative competence, accuracy, clarity and flexibility can be developed. Translation is a real-life, natural activity which many learners use on a daily basis either formally or informally. Translation is a common



strategy used by many learners even if teachers do not encourage it. Discussion of differences and similarities between languages help students understand problems caused by their native language. Developing skills in translation is a natural and logical part of improving language proficiency. According to Duff (1989), for the last two decades teachers and students have started to use translation to teach / learn English language. Translation is sometimes referred to as the fifth language skill alongside the other four basic skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Translation holds a special importance at an intermediate and advanced level: in the advanced or final stage of language teaching, translation from L1 to L2 and from L2 to L1 is recognized as the fifth skill and the most important social skill since it promotes communication and understanding between strangers (Ross, 2000). If students are aware of the differences, language interference, or transfer, and intervention from their own language are likely to be reduced. Native language use in the English classroom can cause students to think that words and structures in English have a L1 correspondence, which does not exist. Therefore, raising students' consciousness of the non-parallel nature of language allows learners to think comparatively (Atkinson, 1993). The important question is how to reach a balance of the L1 usage in the learning process. It is thought that four factors should be considered, namely, the students previous experience, their level, the stage of the course, and the stage of the individual lesson (Atkinson, 1993).

There is an opinion that rigidly eliminating or limiting the native language does not appear to guarantee better acquisition, nor does it foster the humanistic approach that recognizes learners' identities (Mattioli, 2004). Translation as a teaching tool needs to take into account a number of different aspects, such as grammar, syntax, collocation and connotation. Uncritical use of translation may give learners insufficient, confusing or even inaccurate information about target language. However good the students are at understanding authentic reading materials, some of them keep mentally translating from L2 into L1 and vice versa. This fact makes teachers of English consider the importance of translation for learning purposes. It is important to distinguish between translation into L1 (mother tongue) and translation into L2 (second or foreign language). These two types of activities are very different from one another. According to Shiyab and Abdullateef (2001: 1) 'translation facilitates and speeds up the learner's comprehension process' but learners' output will be different according to the language direction of the translation activities. Translation into the native language implies that the source text (ST) is the 'foreign' element to work on and, in this case, 'the translator runs into the problem of analysis' (ibid: 3). On the other hand, translating into L2 means that the TT will be the foreign element to deal with and 'here, the translator runs into the problem of synthesis' (ibid.). Although many scholars, researchers and practitioners agree upon the fact that translating from L2 into L1 is more natural, the assumption of this work is

that there is no much difference between a translation into L2 and a written composition in L2. In both cases, indeed, students are required to produce a piece of work in a foreign language and in a written composition in L2 students have to mentally translate their ideas, concepts and opinions into a language they do not fully master as in the case of their L1. Translation into the mother tongue or L1 is believed to be a much more reliable and natural practice due to a better linguistic and cultural competence in L1. The basic difference between L1 and L2 is that the former is naturally acquired whereas the latter is learned and, in this case, both the linguistic and cultural competences are in a continuous developmental stage. There are undoubtedly many advantages in translating into the native language as compared to translation into L2, such as better knowledge of 1) syntax, 2) morphology, 3) semantics, 4) culture, and 5) correct use of lexis in different text types (general vs. specialized vocabulary). Translation into L2, however, requires more in-depth knowledge of the above-mentioned language features and it requires a continuous reference and use of grammar books and dictionaries (general vs. specialized as well as monolingual vs. bilingual). Translation into L2 is characterized by a certain degree of doubt and uncertainty. This work, however, argues that there are common difficulties in both translation and writing activities carried out in L2. One of the major problems is lexical choice appropriateness as in some languages, such as English for instance, one word, be it a noun or a verb, may have more than

one meaning according to the context in which it is used. Collocations also pose several problems in L2 production as compared to L1 production. Syntactical difficulties should also be mentioned as syntax may greatly differ from one language to another. Words and sentences need a complex to be correctly understood and/or translated. For instance, a simple sentence in Arabic such as سوف أزور أسبانيا requires more information in order to be correctly translated as one of the following options:

- I am visiting Spain.
- I am going to visit Spain.
- I will visit Spain.

Idioms, fixed expressions, proverbs and puns may also be difficult for L2 learners either in translation or in a writing activity in L2. For instance, if English people 'knock on wood', Italians 'touch iron'. All these difficulties are therefore found in both translation into and writing activities in L2. Writing in L2 implies a conscious or subconscious mental translation on the part of students. If this mental translation activity is externalized, then students can be taught how to control it and by highlighting differences between L1 and L2 language features learners can better remember mistakes and learn from them. I recommend that other researchers should write about appropriate methods and techniques which help University students in writing skills. Also, they can write about the role of translation in developing students' writing skills at University level.

### Conclusion

Translation has long been thought to be one of a few key cognitive processes in writing; we boldly propose for consideration the view that translation is

the fundamental cognitive process of writing. The four cognitive processes in the Hayes and Flower's (1980) model – planning, translating, reviewing and revising – may be the higher-level executive functions of brain that regulate communication across many mental processes involving different brain systems not only for writing but also for many other functions. Translation enhances students writing skills, as well as to facilitates and speeds up the learner's comprehension processes but learners' output will be different according to the language direction of the translation activities. An increased professional concern in teaching writing skills has manifested itself by a number of publications in this area since the 1980s. Issues related to the teaching of writing and to the research findings on the writing of non-native speakers are of a particular interest to linguists and teachers, who claim that one of the most valuable and essential skills is the ability to write accurately, briefly and clearly. Writing skills are generally taught in most foreign language courses and there is always a need to refer to focus, organization, elaboration, style and conventions. The same applies to translation and therefore the use of translation as a way to enhance writing skills is perfectly justified. Furthermore, writing skills can be enhanced through the use of written commentaries where students have the opportunity to write about all the difficulties encountered when translating the passage and the strategies used in order to deal with them.

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