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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## Translation as a Mediation Activity for Vocabulary Retention: An Empirical Study

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**ABSTRACT**

This study investigates whether translation as a mediation activity in the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) fosters better vocabulary retention than English-only vocabulary exercises for students of English as a foreign language. Translation as a language instruction and acquisition method has been the topic of much debate between proponents of English-only methodologies and advocates of bi/multilingual philosophies. This study intends to spotlight the pedagogical value of translation in the EFL classroom. To that end, quantitative data were collected from 82 students at the Classes Préparatoires aux Grandes Écoles (Preparatory Classes for Engineering and Management Schools) (henceforth, CPGE) in Marrakesh, Morocco. The Statistical Package for Social Science (henceforth, SPSS) was used to analyze the data collected from two posttests. The results prove that translation as a mediation activity leads to better vocabulary retention than English-only vocabulary exercises. This study suggests that translation as mediation is a valid language learning activity to implement in English classrooms.

**KEYWORDS**

Translation; mediation; vocabulary retention; English-only modes; CEFR; EFT

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**1. Introduction**

Any study on language teaching and learning activities should take into account real concerns like the goal of teaching or learning a language, the most effective methods for doing so, and the methods for evaluating teaching and learning success. These questions have naturally motivated this study. The solution it offers, however, is related to a practice that is not very well-liked by orthodox theorists of language instruction. This study examines the efficacy of translation as a teaching and learning aid for EFL in the Moroccan setting of CPGE. Stated differently, its objective is to assess its effectiveness as a mediation activity outlined in the CEFR as a teaching approach among CPGE EFL instructors and students.

For decades, and ever since the decline of the Grammar Translation method, translation in FLT has led to a clandestine existence due mainly to the direct method's obsession with monolingual language teaching methodologies, which were originally motivated by the pioneering creed of native-speaker teachers (Butzkamm & Caldwell, 2009). Across times and philosophies, language teaching trends have emerged and vanished, but they have all maintained the same cynical status of translation or any own language use in FLT. With the rise of globalization, societies are more fluid than ever before, and multilingualism is the new linguistic norm among citizens of the world. Within this perspective, CEFR (CoE, 2018) reinstalled translation as a mediation activity recommended in FLT classrooms in Europe.

Reflecting the 'can-do' spirit of the CEFR descriptors for mediation, the current study aims to gauge the efficiency of translation as a language learning activity and investigate its causal relationship to vocabulary retention. In this context, the CEFR conceives translation as a linguistic mediation activity outlined with clearly defined descriptors. In particular, the current study examines

whether translation is conducive to better vocabulary retention than English-only instruction for Moroccan CPGE students learning English as a foreign language. Therefore, this study intends to provide for three questions:

1. Does translation foster better vocabulary retention than the English-only teaching mode?
2. Does the English-only teaching mode foster better vocabulary retention than translation?
3. Do translation and English-only modes of language instruction equally foster vocabulary retention?

The primary hypotheses are:

1. Null hypothesis:  
Teaching vocabulary through translation leads to vocabulary retention scores similar to English-only vocabulary instruction.
2. Alternative hypothesis 1:  
Teaching vocabulary through translation leads to better vocabulary retention scores than the English-only mode of instruction.
3. Alternative hypothesis 2:  
Teaching vocabulary through English-only modes of instruction leads to better vocabulary retention scores than through translation.

To test those hypotheses, the researcher conducted a quasi-experiment in which he compared the scores of an intervention group and a comparison group on two posttests regarding vocabulary retention, one for vocabulary reception and the other for vocabulary production.

## **2. Literature Review**

Krashen's Monitor Hypothesis (1985), as inspired by Chomsky's model of L1 acquisition (1957), established "unquestionable" monolingualism, which significantly impacts many of today's classroom activities. The underlying idea is that acquiring a second or foreign language follows the same natural sequence as L1. Thus, exposure to understandable input is the only factor that helps someone learn a new language without conscious learning. However, research has demonstrated that L1 and L2 vocabulary are stored in the same brain region for second or foreign-language learners because L1 meanings are fully transferred to L2 forms (Ozernyi, 2021). One assumption is that a process of literal translation is inescapable and occurs regardless of whether it is appreciated or considered useless (Cook, 2010). Put differently, L2 lexical units activate L2 learners' mental lexicon with meanings corresponding to their L1 counterparts (Smentek, 2017). If that is the process at work, it would be best to use translation instead of forbidding it since total immersion, as proclaimed, is impossible to achieve in the communicative approach.

Similarly, translation aids students in avoiding mistakes in word selection and application. According to Cook (2010), Learners will build a sizable vocabulary during the learning process, after which various issues may occur. First, learners eventually become so proficient in their second language that they are hesitant to pick up new terminology. The second is that students could acquire a vast amount of unnecessary jargon. These issues lead to the incorrect or imprecise use of terminology. Thus, translation exercises can remedy those problems by pressing learners to search for the needed words. Also, translation helps to integrate the new lexical items into the existing vocabulary bank. Therefore, including translation into L2 instruction improves vocabulary-building opportunities, even among advanced learners with enough circumlocution skills.

Vocabulary is an axial component of any language competence. In the same way, vocabulary learning is a central aim in the language learning and teaching process. Academic research and pedagogical innovations, particularly in EFL teaching and learning, have sought to investigate vocabulary learning and teaching activities. Therefore, as much as they have recommended some as effective, they have also perversely warned against others being presumably not pedagogical or counter-intuitive. Subsequently, in the EFL context, the English-only teaching mode has been advocated as the default way to effective vocabulary learning since the rise of the direct method (Cook, 2010). That belief is fundamentally based on the acclaimed benefits of total immersion of the learners in monolingual use of English in the classroom (Krashen, 1981). On the other hand, translation, or any use of a language other than English in the classroom, has been scorned as less effective or even harmful.

However, with the rise of bilingualism and multilingualism as defining qualities of today's world citizens, new and old language teaching and learning principles have been mutually adverse and exclusive. On the one hand, the monolingual methodologies seek to maintain and consolidate a status that has been established as self-evident since the rise of the direct method. On the other hand, multilingual methodologies have emerged and expressed the need to comply with the new demographics of the global language classroom. Particularly for EFL, the debate between proponents of English-only modes on one side and advocates of the multilingual modes of language instruction on the other has been revitalized, especially after the publication of the CEFR with its companion volume (Piccardo et al., 2019) that recommends translation as a mediation activity in the language classroom with clearly defined descriptors.

### 3. Methodology

Because the participants came from intact classes, no random assignment was effected. Therefore, the study adopted a quasi-experimental design whereby a group of 41 participants is the intervention group, and another group of 41 participants represents the comparison group. This study measures the impact of translation as a mediation activity on vocabulary retention. To this effect, the scores of two posttests for vocabulary reception and production were computerized and analyzed using SPSS.

#### 3.1 Participants

82 participants took part in this study. They were all 1st year-CPGE students in Marrakech and came from different parts of the country. To all of them, English is a foreign language and a binding component of the CPGE syllabus and examination. There was no random assignment for convenience, so the participants came from four intact classes; two received the intervention, while the others were considered the comparison group. All the participants were at B1 proficiency level in English according to a placement test administered before the study. For the sake of homogeneity, nine other students were excluded from the study as they showed a significantly higher proficiency level in English. So, they were assigned helping roles in conducting the study.

#### 3.2 Procedure

The researcher conceived the experiment in compliance with the quasi-experimental design since participants in the intervention and the comparison groups come from intact classes with no random assignment. The basic idea was to test whether teaching vocabulary through translation leads to better retention than through an English-only mode of instruction. To that effect, the researcher decided on a text that treats the issue of refugees as a topic on the syllabus for first-year CPGE first-year in Morocco. Then, the researcher selected 30 vocabulary items from the text and substituted them with their least frequent synonyms according to the National British Corpus to enhance their unfamiliarity. The participants were then given a pretest in the form of a table with all 30 words, and the researcher instructed them to check 'Yes' for the words they knew or 'No' for the words they did not know. Only the words (12) that were unfamiliar to all the participants in both groups were considered suitable material for the intervention.

After the pretest, the researcher gave the intervention and the comparison groups the reading text. The participants in the intervention group (henceforth, the mediation group) were instructed to work in small groups and orally mediate the gist of the text to their partners so that their mediated texts comprise all the 12 words highlighted in the text. Participants in the mediation group were instructed to mediate the gist of the text in Arabic or French or any combination of both languages. Conversely, participants in the English-only group (henceforth, the no-mediation group) were given the exact text with the same highlighted words and instructed to sit in small groups, read the text, and do two exercises about the vocabulary items under study. The first was a matching exercise in which the students needed to match the words with their definitions. In the second exercise, the participants were given sentences with blanks and were asked to fill in the blanks with suitable words from a list that contained the same 12 vocabulary items under study. The exercises were corrected immediately after completion.

After the mediation activity and the vocabulary exercises, the participants in both groups were guided through a word game to distract their attention away from the vocabulary items. After the game, the participants in both groups were given a posttest to measure the number of vocabulary items they retained. The posttest combined two parts. The first part tested their receptive memory, in which they were asked to provide Arabic or French equivalents of the 12 vocabulary items provided in English. In the second part, they were given Arabic and French equivalents and were asked to provide the exact vocabulary items under study. The researcher computed and analyzed the results of both tests statistically.

In order to investigate whether there was a difference in vocabulary retention between the intervention and the comparison groups, it was necessary to compare the mean scores of both groups on each of the two tests. To that end, an independent samples t-test was effected on SPSS (V.26).

### 4. Results and Discussion

#### 4.1 Results of the reception posttest

Tables 1 and 2 below reflect the results of the reception posttests for both the mediation and no-mediation groups.

**Table 1**  
*Group Statistics for the Reception Posttest*

<b>Group</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>	<b>Std. Error Mean</b>
No-mediation	41	3.731	2.225	.347
Mediation	41	6.317	2.592	.404

As clear from Table 1 above, the mean score for the no-mediation group (N=41) was M=3.73, with a standard deviation of SD = 2.22, while the mean score for the mediation group (N=41) was numerically bigger M = 6.31, with a standard deviation of SD = 2.59. To test the hypothesis that the mediation group and the no-mediation group are associated with statistically significant differences in mean vocabulary retention scores on a receptive test, an independent sample mean t-test was used to compare the two groups. Levene's F test was also used to confirm if the assumption of homogeneity of variance was satisfied  $f(80) = 1.46$ ,  $p(80) = .229$ . A statistically significant impact was connected with the independent t-test,  $t(80) = -4.84$ ,  $p = .000 < .05$ . Therefore, the mediation group was associated with a statistically significant larger mean vocabulary retention than the no-mediation group. Because the mediation and the no-mediation groups have different standard deviations, Glass's Delta was estimated at 1.16, which is a large effect size according to Cohen (1988, p. 22).

**Table 2**  
*Independent Samples Test for the Reception Posttest*

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower		Upper
Score	Equal variances assumed	1.468	.229	-4.845	80	.000	-2.585	.533	-3.647	-1.523
	Equal variances not assumed.			-4.845	78.201	.000	-2.585	.533	-3.647	-1.523

**4.2 Results of the production posttest**

After the reception posttest, this section investigates whether there are differences between the scores of the posttests for the two groups in terms of target vocabulary production. In other words, the second part of the posttest compares the mean scores of the mediation and the no-mediation groups relevant to producing the target vocabulary items. It ultimately states whether they reject or confirm the null hypothesis in favor of one of the two alternative hypotheses. Tables 3 and 4 below reflect the results of the production posttests for both the mediation and no-mediation groups.

**Table 3**  
*Group Statistics for the production posttest*

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Score	No-mediation group	41	5.1220	3.27258	.51109
	Mediation Group	41	7.5366	2.30323	.35970

As clear from Table 3 above, the mean score for the no-mediation group (N=41) was M = 5.12, with a standard deviation of SD = 3.27, while the mean score for the mediation group (N=41) was numerically bigger M = 7.53, with a standard deviation of SD = 2.30. To test the hypothesis that the mediation group and the no-mediation group are associated with a statistically significant difference in mean vocabulary retention scores on a productive test, a two-sample, independent means t-test was used to compare the two groups. Levene's F test was also used to confirm if the assumption of homogeneity of variance was satisfied  $f(80) = 8.95$ ,  $p(80) = .004$ . A statistically significant impact was connected with the independent t-test,  $t(80) = -3.86$ ,  $p = .000 < .05$ . Therefore, the mediation group was associated with significantly larger mean vocabulary retention than the no-mediation group. Because the mediation and the no-mediation groups have different standard deviations, Glass's Delta was estimated at 0.73, which is a large effect size according to Cohen (1988, p. 22).

**Table 4***Independent Samples Test for the Production Posttest*

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper	
Score	Equal variances assumed	8.950	.004	-3.864	80	.000	-2.414	.624	-3.658	-1.170
	Equal variances not assumed.			-3.864	71.819	.000	-2.414	.624	-3.660	-1.168

### 4.3 Discussion

As shown in Table 1 and Table 3, the t-test results reject the null hypothesis and support the alternative hypothesis 1, which stipulates that translation as a linguistic mediation activity leads to better receptive vocabulary retention than English-only instruction. The results of this study have important implications for EFL teachers seeking to improve their students' vocabulary learning. Typically, this study inspires confidence in using translation as a linguistic mediation activity to foster vocabulary retention.

In the same way, Table 3 and Table 4 reflect that the t-test results on the production posttest reject the null hypothesis, which stipulates that teaching vocabulary through translation or English-only modes leads to equal scores in vocabulary retention. In the same way, they also reject alternative hypothesis 2, which states that teaching vocabulary through English-only mode results in better vocabulary retention than if taught through translation.

On the other hand, the results of this study, on both the reception and the production posttests, support alternative hypothesis 1, which stipulates that translation as a linguistic mediation activity leads to better receptive and productive vocabulary retention than English-only instruction. Therefore, this study contributes essential evidence for EFL teachers seeking to improve their students' vocabulary learning. Typically, this study should be considered next to other studies that have investigated the effectiveness of translation as a valid activity in the EFL classroom (Liao, 2006; Prince, 1996). In brief, this study inspires confidence in using translation as a linguistic mediation activity to foster vocabulary retention.

This study was conducted with participants from one CPGE center in Morocco. Therefore, one limitation of this study is the small sample size. The researcher acknowledges that this may limit the generalizability of the findings, especially since there are more than 20 similar schools in the country. Another limitation is that the study only measured vocabulary retention based on one class study time. Further research could include larger samples and multiple measurements.

### 5. Conclusion

This study was conducted to gauge the efficiency of translation as a mediation activity in the retention of vocabulary within the EFL classrooms compared to other vocabulary teaching exercises. From a wider perspective, it was meant to investigate the usefulness of translation in foreign language teaching and learning. Overall, the findings of this study suggest that teaching vocabulary through translation as a form of linguistic mediation improved the overall scores on the receptive and productive vocabulary posttests. The results also suggest that the mediation group achieved better vocabulary retention than the no-mediation group, which received the standard English-only teaching method concerning the mean scores of both the receptive and the productive posttests. These findings imply that EFL teachers seeking to improve their students' vocabulary acquisition within the CEFR should reconsider the potential of translation to implement mediation in their EFL language classrooms. However, the current study was conducted with EFL learners in the CPGE, who represent a specific category that does not reflect the typical mainstream language learners in Morocco. Thus, the findings of this study cannot be generalized. Future research could further explore the effectiveness of translation as a mediation activity in teaching vocabulary in mainstream EFL classrooms in Morocco. Other research pathways may investigate the validity of translation as a mediation activity in the teaching of other language competencies, namely listening and speaking.

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