



Translation and the Use of L1 in Spanish Language Classes

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Abstract

This paper studies translation and the use of L1 as a pedagogical and learning tool in beginning and intermediate Spanish language classes for native students of English. Overall, students have been discouraged to translate from English (L1) to Spanish (L2), and vice versa, especially because the method of thinking, speaking and writing in English first and then translating to Spanish usually has been considered counterproductive. At the same time, students have been told not to translate from Spanish to English if they can guess the meaning. There are, however, exceptions to the belief that translation using the learner's mother tongue inherently and necessarily hinders the acquisition of the four skills in second-language learning. Some of the exceptions are grammatical aspects such as the sentence structure involving the verb "gustar" and the different constructions of "se." When teaching "gustar" and other similarly functioning verbs, which work differently from the statement "I like ..." in English, literally translating example sentences written in Spanish to English (from the L2 to the L1) reduces confusion and helps students to correctly complete the subject-verb agreement as they write sentences in Spanish. The L2-to-L1 order of literal translation, which also serves as a contrastive analysis, is important because it will tell students what the grammatical subject is in the Spanish sentence. When it comes to teaching and learning the constructions of "se," including the impersonal se and what I call the 'accidental' se, translation becomes an indispensable tool. In the case of the latter, literal translation from the L2 to the L1 is essential in order to clarify the fact that the object and the subject in the English sentence correspond to the subject and the indirect object, respectively, in the Spanish sentence. Once students understand this fundamental difference, the L1-to-L2 translation as well as more liberal L2-to-L1 translation can be used repeatedly to reinforce the retention of the grammatical knowledge and to increase their fluency in both speaking and writing.

Keywords: *pedagogical translation, Spanish language classes;*

This paper studies translation and the use of L1 (English) as a pedagogical and learning tool in beginning and intermediate Spanish language classes for native students of English. The emphasis on using the target language (L2 or Spanish) in Spanish classes with the goal of decreasing dependency on English and increasing fluency in Spanish, has generally been promoted as an effective approach. Students have been discouraged to translate from English (L1) to Spanish (L2), and vice versa, for such practice has been considered to hinder the natural advancement in acquiring the four skills, speaking, listening, reading, and writing, in the target language. This belief to a certain degree holds true especially because the method of thinking, speaking and writing in English first and then translating to Spanish has proven counterproductive. Exceptions to this well-accepted and established methodology need to be made when teaching a number of grammatical structures whose logic is significantly different from that of their English counterparts. Verbs like "gustar" and the constructions of "se" are some of the examples that can benefit from translation. It needs to be pointed out, however, that this translation tool is not to be confused with *code switching*, especially if it is used unnecessarily and habitually, which rather works negatively and prevents the more natural and speedy learning of Spanish.

In the recent years, there have been studies on the general benefits of translation as an effective pedagogical and learning tool. For instance, Andrés Canga-Alonso and Andrea Rubio-Goitia in their article "Students' Reflections on Pedagogical Translation in Spanish as a Foreign Language," promotes the idea. In this paper, however, I will illustrate how students can benefit from translation, giving specific grammatical constructions as examples.

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First, when teaching "gustar" and other similarly functioning verbs, teachers run into a certain degree of resistance on the part of students who are puzzled by and thus are not receptive to this novel way of expressing one's likes and dislikes. Literally translating example sentences written in Spanish to English (from the L2 to the L1) can reduce the confusion and help students to correctly complete the subject-verb agreement as they write sentences in Spanish. For example, the sentence "Me gusta la clase de español." can be translated literally as "The Spanish class is pleasing to me." This way students can identify "la clase de español" as the subject and "me" as the indirect object of the sentence. It is also necessary to practice with plural subjects as in "Me gustan *las manzanas*," which can be translated literally as "Apples are pleasing to me." Although the literal translation produces awkwardly sounding sentences, without this process, which at the same time serves as a contrastive analysis, students tend to start from "I like the Spanish class." and translate it to Spanish, ending with a grammatically incorrect "Me gusto la clase de español." The L2-to-L1 order of literal translation, and not the other way, is important because it will tell students what the grammatical subject is in the Spanish sentence. Once students clearly understand the difference between Spanish and English, more liberal translation can be used: "I like the Spanish class." Then, both the L2-to-L1 and the L1-to-L2 translation need to be repeatedly used in order to positively reinforce what has been taught and to help students achieve fluency. To do this, the instructor can ask questions such as "¿Cómo se dice 'You like bananas.?'?" and "¿Qué quiere decir 'Nos gusta la música clásica.?'?" It is also important to do a sufficient number of written translation exercises, especially on the board, so that the entire class can learn from the mistakes and improvements made by the students. Other verbs including "encantar," "fascinar," "faltar," and "importar" can be taught in a similar fashion. This method can obviously apply to the other verbal tenses as well, depending on the class level. The instructor needs to add that, with Spanish infinitives as the subject, however, the verb needs to be singular regardless of the number of the infinitives. "Te *encanta* cantar" and "Te *encanta* cantar y bailar" both take the singular form "encanta," for example. This important detail has to be taken into account while translating a sentence, especially from the L1 to the L2.

With respect to teaching and learning the constructions of "se," I will examine two categories: *the impersonal se*, which sometimes overlaps with *the passive se*, and what I call *the accidental se*. *The impersonal se* is a very useful and frequently used structure in Spanish. It is also fairly easy to use as long as learners grasp its key distinction, which is the lack of importance placed on the doer of the action. This is clearly seen when translated to English. For instance, the sentence "Se habla español." can be translated to English in several different ways: "Spanish is spoken.," "One speaks Spanish.," "They speak Spanish.," and "You speak Spanish." In the last two sentences, the subjects "They" and "You" do not refer to a specific doer of the action of speaking but to a they and a you in a general, impersonal sense. Hence the name "*impersonal se*." Therefore, who does the action is not really important whereas whether the action is carried out or not is what really matters. Added to the translations the instructor needs to point out that, in the sentence in Spanish, "español" is the subject and thus the verb needs to be in the singular form "habla." If the subject is plural, then the verb should be plural, "hablan," as in "Se hablan inglés y español.," which is translated to "English and Spanish are spoken." or "They (One, or You) speak English and Spanish." Just as with "gustar" and similar verbs, however, this subject-verb agreement holds true unless infinitives are the subject. This is why this grammatical difference needs to be illustrated with translated sentences. If this grammar is taught using only the target language for the sake of encouraging students to use Spanish, students are often lost without being able to identify the grammatical subject in sentences in Spanish.

In the case of *the accidental se*, the L2-to-L1 literal translation becomes even more crucial. *The accidental se* or what some call *the no-fault se* is used to describe accidents and situations that happen to someone without planning or anticipating them. This construction does not exist in English since one has to add "by accident" to indicate the accidental and unexpected nature of such unplanned incidents. It is also one of the most confusing, difficult grammatical aspects for the native speakers of English to learn. The inherent difficulty lies in the inversion of the subject and the object that takes place when translated from Spanish to English or the other way. Let's take a look at the following example:



Se	me (indirect object)	perdieron	las llaves del coche. (subject)
	I (subject)	lost	the car keys. (direct object)

As shown above, the subject and the indirect object of the sentence in Spanish correspond to the direct object and the subject in the liberally (and not literally) translated sentence in English. Due to this inversion students frequently make the mistake of conjugating the verb as “perdí” (as in “Se me *perdí* las llaves del coche”) instead of “perdieron.” They make this mistake consistently as they do different types of assignments or take exams, whether these consist of fill-in-the-blank sections or writing answers in complete sentences. Now let’s translate literally the sentence in Spanish to English:

The car keys (subject)	got lost on	me. (indirect object)
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Since in this literal translation the subject still remains the same, students can identify the subject without difficulty and conjugate the verb correctly. This helps students understand the fundamental difference between the Spanish and English sentence structures and reduces the number of mistakes considerably. Once this is achieved, the L1-to-L2 translation as well as more liberal L2-to-L1 translation can be practices repeatedly to retain the grammatical knowledge and to increase fluency in speaking writing, listening, and reading.

Of course, the grammatical features examined so far in this paper are not the only constructions for which translation can be utilized to enhance student learning. Without going into details due to the limit put on the length of this paper, I need to mention the contrast between Spanish infinitives and English gerunds (see the study by Gómez-Castejón). Also, another good example will be a list of verbs that undergo a semantic transformation in the preterite tense: *conocer*, *saber*, *querer*, and *poder*.

In addition to being an effective pedagogical tool, translation can also be something students enjoy doing as they learn Spanish. I have found this to be true in my classes where students welcome the activities that involve translation, especially during the lessons that covered the constructions I included in this paper. I have also had an opportunity to confirm what I have observed in the classroom at the institution where I teach. With the intention of gauging student interest in learning Spanish through translation and of promoting the Spanish program, I organized and hosted a translation competition for students in language classes. From the beginning stage of recruiting participants and until the end of the competition itself, students showed their enthusiasm beyond my expectations. They welcomed the idea, and more students than I could admit wanted to participate. On the day of the event, I was pleasantly surprised that the competition among students taking SPAN 1001, the very beginning course titled Elementary Spanish I, was fierce. What was more gratifying, however, was just how much they enjoyed translating and competing.

It has been widely believed that translation using the learner's mother tongue, English in this case, inherently and necessarily hinders learning Spanish. While it is true that the overuse of and overdependence on English such as habitual translation can deter the more natural progress in learning Spanish, I have observed over the years that translation and the appropriate use of L1 can benefit the acquisition of the four skills in the target language. At the same time, using translation as a teaching tool does not mean that other methods should be excluded. Therefore, if used with other effective, fun approaches, translation and the use of L1 can be a highly productive teaching and learning tool. While being able to connect with their mother tongue and thus feeling more comfortable and less obstructed, students can become more receptive to the different linguistic culture, as shown in the different sentence constructions, and achieve fluency in Spanish with fewer obstacles.



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