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Idioms in Transit: Investigating the Effectiveness of Translation-Based Teaching Methods in EFL Settings

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Abstract

This research evaluates the benefits of translation teaching techniques in EFL classrooms, particularly in terms of idiomatic expressions, comprehension, and learning. Idioms in EFL courses pose significant challenges for learners because they require proper contextual usage and translational meanings of familiar cultural and linguistic phrases. Many language learners complain about the regular issues that arise from using translation techniques with their first language. This research aims to develop alternative methods that overcome language and cultural barriers during the learning of idiomatic expressions. This study examines the academic value of using translation assumption instruction for idioms, allowing researchers to investigate its effects on memory retention, contextual practice, and cultural competence through scholarly research. Generally, it is assumed that language students understand language more effectively when taught through translation methods, creating a setting that facilitates interpretation. However, it does not stand true entirely as the effectiveness of translation-dependent strategies relies on having appropriate instructions for students and comparable cultural backgrounds between target and source languages. Hence, this paper presents translation, communicative, and contextual approaches as optimal strategies for international students to learn idioms in English as a second

language. The research provides essential information about EFL language learning, thereby enhancing existing discussions on the implementation of translation in educational settings.

Keywords: Translation methods, Idiom learning, EFL Teaching

Introduction

The EFL education field has long sought effective teaching approaches to develop language competence, particularly in understanding idiomatic phrases. Members of the EFL community need effective teaching techniques to help students master idioms that combine cultural and contextual elements (Khonbi&Sadeghi). The EFL classroom has various approaches, yet translation-based teaching methods are widely disputed and commonly used. Using L1 translation to enhance idiomatic content understanding attracts advocates and critics who disagree on whether translation hinders genuine language acquisition (Liao, 2006). They believe that the use of translation techniques in idiom instruction fails to achieve the desired results because it creates L1 influences, which block fluent learning and hinder essential skills for mastering English idioms with cultural sensitivity (Yunus&Hmaidan, 2021).

Since the 19th century, when the Grammar-Translation Method dominated education, translation has been a core component that emphasizes written elements over practical speech proficiency. Idioms continue to be effective in EFL settings because students find it easier to understand their foreign meanings through corresponding expressions in their native language (Keo & Lan, 2024). However, this apparent accessibility belies a deeper pedagogical flaw. The attainment of language fluency demands target language immersion and interactive experiences according to Language acquisition theories, which focus on Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Swain's Output Hypothesis (Bailey & Fahad, 2021). Learners who use translation participate in learning activities that maintain connections between their native language and the target language, which may impede their ability to develop independent L2 mastery. Using L1 mediation for expressions rooted in cultural norms can alter the accuracy and sociocultural fit of idioms because they depend on cultural norms (Machida, 2011).

Translation works effectively as an instructional method, provided there is a linguistic and cultural overlap between the source and target languages. However, this key condition does not apply to all cases. Translating in educational settings that teach English as a foreign language can become counterproductive, especially for learners whose native languages substantially differ from English (García, Kleifgen, & Falchi, 2008). For example, the lack of equivalent meanings for English idioms such as "kick the bucket" or "spill the beans" often results in imprecise translations, leading to misunderstandings in various languages. That means essential EFL instruction objectives suffer because the mismatch between translation and real-life idiom use prevents students from effectively employing these expressions in authentic situations.

Critics of translation-based approaches note that such techniques can develop a passive learning system for students. They believe that students prioritize L2 content comprehension over memorizing equivalence translations rather than engaging in active L2 learning (Miyazaki, 2019). This is because the teaching technique is against communicative and contextual strategies, as it emphasizes exposure, inference, and practice in authentic L2 contexts. Ma and Tsai (2021) demonstrate that immersive education methods make learners better able to derive meaning from contextual information since this ability is crucial for proper idiom understanding. That means educators who base instruction on translation risk prioritizing immediate understanding over developing lasting fluency skills, which makes students incapable of handling spontaneous, natural language.

The study by Briggs and Smith (2017) shows that the negative aspects of teaching idioms through translation exceed the advantages of English as a foreign language instruction. The analysis of available studies reveals that the instructional methods present three key limitations, including L1 dependency, cultural ambiguity, and an inadequate fit with different linguistic profiles. Hence, this paper promotes communicative and contextual frameworks as better alternatives so they can reshape idiom acquisition discussions through methods that build independence, adaptability, and cultural competencies. By challenging the effectiveness of translation as a pedagogical crutch, this investigation contributes to broader conversations about optimizing language education in EFL settings, urging educators to reconsider entrenched

practices in favor of methods that truly empower learners to master the complexities of English idiomatic expression.

Literature Review

Given that numerous studies challenge their effectiveness, research institutions are investigating translation-based teaching approaches in EFL classrooms to facilitate the acquisition of idiomatic expressions. Apolonio (2021) emphasizes that non-literal constructs with cultural origins require teaching methods that allow for complete language immersion rather than relying on first-language resources as translation tools. This study combines research that highlights fundamental criticisms of translation-based methods, demonstrating that these methods can strengthen L1 interference while hindering fluent language use and cultural competency. Therefore, the review supports the use of alternative instructional approaches in EFL idiomatic learning.

The Input Hypothesis of SLA theorist Krashen (1985) posits that comprehension in L2 language is essential for natural language development, which serves as the basis for evaluating translation-based learning methods. The reliance on L1 through translation causes learners to develop cognitive dependencies that block the integration of L2 structure knowledge into their systems (Luo, 2024). According to Chung (2024), translation-based practices lead to a more comparative than immersive learning approach, particularly affecting exposure to idioms, as direct L1 equivalents often fail to exist or misunderstand their purpose. For example, when translators present the English idiom "raining cats and dogs" to languages without an equivalent expression, the result can create misunderstandings about this phrase's figurative meaning and practical function. The mismatch between source text and target language illustrates a common pattern in academic research that translation leads to reduced authenticity through simplified linguistic structures (Elmgrab, 2015).

Research studies add evidence to support the theoretical processing issues. In their research study, Liao and Fukuya (2004) observed that Chinese students achieve better results by learning idioms assimilated to context instead of through translation methods. The translation learners struggled with L1 influence, leading to mistranslations and unnatural rendering of idioms during

their L2 production tasks. Stengers et al. (2011) believe that EFL learners who use translation for idioms experience short-term memory enhancement, but they do not develop lasting L2 fluency or an understanding of cultural material. These findings align with Swain's (1995) Output Hypothesis, which emphasizes the role of active L2 production in solidifying linguistic competence—a process undermined by passive reliance on L1 translation (Donesch-Jezo, 2011).

Moreover, the presence of learner diversity with multiple cultures and languages makes translation-based methods less effective. Richards and Rodgers (2014) note that the success of translation hinges on structural and cultural proximity between L1 and L2, a condition unmet in many EFL contexts. Communication skills deteriorate due to translation limitations, which create permanent errors in their speech when speakers attempt to translate idiomatic phrases into English (House, 2015). This shows that translation enforces senseless language views by ignoring sociocultural elements needed for mastering idioms.

Bilingual education classrooms highlight the weakness of using L1 mediation as a standard practice because it cannot adequately respond to students with diverse learning needs. Communicative and contextual approaches represent beneficial options that challenge the exclusive use of translation techniques for teaching idioms in English as a Second Language (ESOL) settings (Heng, 2014). According to Tran (2012), students should learn idioms through purposeful activities within realistic contexts to develop their ability to infer meanings and respond accordingly. The effectiveness of reading, combined with student-student interaction, creates natural semantic discovery without relying on translation assistance (Shea, 2017). These methods support sociocultural theories from Vygotsky (1978) because they promote contextual learning activities ahead of separate translation drills. Boers (2011) presented cognitive linguistic methods, such as idiomatic etymology research, to help students remember phrasal verbalization without language mediation.

In short, it can be deduced that translation-based approaches from L1 create ineffective solutions for developing EFL learners' ability to manage idiomatic expressions. These teaching methods present problems because they reinforce L1 dependency yet conceal cultural elements and fail to

teach linguistic context skills, which contradict the proven principles of SLA. The analysis reveals an important need to adopt learning methods that empower students with L2 autonomy while integrating cultural knowledge, as such approaches provide a better framework for idiomatic education in EFL classes.

Research Design

The research employs a secondary qualitative design to carefully analyze the limitations of translational instruction methods in teaching idioms to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. The research combines data from two-decade-old empirical studies published in peer-reviewed journals and academic books found in ResearchGate and the ERIC database with materials from Google Scholar. Studies using the selection criteria specifically evaluate translation methods while examining how these approaches affect L1 interference, student fluency, and cultural understanding in idiomatic acquisition. In 2006, Braun and Clarke presented a thematic analysis that interprets data by recognizing patterns of L1 dependency, cultural misalignment, and deficiencies in contextual understanding (Dawadi, 2020). Hence, this research method provides an in-depth examination of classroom problems by drawing on previous studies rather than gathering new data to demonstrate why translation methods should be rejected. The designed analysis method follows an evidence-based approach that adequately supports the main goal of recommending different EFL instruction strategies.

Research Objectives

1. To investigate to what extent translation-based teaching methods lead their target language learners to use interferences from their native tongue during the acquisition of idioms.
2. To evaluate translation instruction methods regarding their influence on students' language abilities when using idioms in context.
3. To determine the adverse effects of translation methods on cultural competence development is necessary for mastering macro phrases.

4. To discover proven methods to improve student learning of idioms without language support.

Research Questions

1. How do translation-based methods lead to Language 1 interference when EFL learners learn idioms?
2. Through what methods do translation approaches hinder the smooth use and contextual meanings of idioms?
3. What effects does the use of translation create to obscure cultural understanding about idioms when instructing them?
4. What alternative methodology does the academic research offer to support productive EFL idiom learning without L1 support?

Data Collection and Sampling

The study employs a secondary qualitative approach to analyze existing scholarly work on translation-based teaching methods in EFL idiomatic instruction. This research analyzed peer-reviewed materials, books, and empirical studies published between 2000 and 2025, obtained from academic platforms such as ResearchGate, ERIC, SpringerLink, and Google Scholar. Research terms, including "translation-based EFL teaching," "idiom acquisition," "L1 interference," and "cultural competence in EFL," determine the selection of appropriate research materials. The chosen sampling approach employed purposive selection methods to combine research studies that explicitly demonstrate translation shortcomings while giving preference to studies that use empirical methods alongside theoretical explanations of fluency retention and cultural understanding. The research targeted 12–16 high-quality sources that guarantee varied and substantial viewpoints. Using existing data, the researcher developed a detailed argument that opposes translation-based approaches, complementing the study's qualitative research design while meeting its critical requirements.

Analytical Approach

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), a secondary qualitative study employs thematic analysis to assess translation-based teaching limitations in teaching idioms to EFL learners. An initial step of the analytical process involves a complete review of the chosen literature to find critiques of translation techniques. The researcher generated initial codes to address three major issues about L1 interference, fluency barriers, and cultural alignment problems. The analysis condensed the initial codes into thematic categories that describe "dependency on L1 frameworks," "barriers to contextual mastery," and "cultural disconnection" as persistent patterns throughout the sources. The analysis used a systematic method to explore how these themes create problems for translation methods by comparing them against evidence for communicative and contextual alternatives. Such an interpretive method ensured the consistent integration of study findings, leading to a clear opposition to translation-based instruction. The research method incorporated repetitive theme adjustment processes that support analysis consistency while staying true to the goal of finding better English language learning methods.

Validity and Limitations

This secondary qualitative study relies on credible peer-reviewed academic sources from recognized databases to establish valid data integrity. Through the systematic implementation of thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), the researcher established reliability by making all coding and theme-creation processes transparent and explicit. The argument's validity increases when examining multiple studies, as it reduces the impact of translation-based methods. The researcher acknowledges that the study faces limitations because it does not collect primary data, which prevents direct observations of contemporary classroom dynamics. The chosen sources may present a critical perspective that could unintentionally lead researchers to distort their findings. The study's emphasis on English as a foreign language environment

restricts how broadly its results can be applied to different types of language acquisition settings. Hence, future researchers need to exercise caution when interpreting the findings.

Results and Discussion

Through secondary qualitative research that analyzes existing literature using thematic methods, the study opposes the effectiveness of translation-based instructional methods in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) idiom. The investigation reveals three central patterns regarding L1 interference manifestations, reduced fluency and contextual ability, and limited cultural knowledge competence that result from using first language (L1) mediation in teaching. The obtained data contradicts the translation interpretation hypothesis presented in the abstract while promoting SLA-adjacent teaching approaches.

L1 interference is the most frequent objection researchers find throughout their findings. State-of-the-art research by Elmgrab (2015) and Liao (2006) confirms that translation maintains L1 connections, which hinders the acquisition process of English idioms as separate L2 units. For example, students who translate the idiom "let the cat out of the bag" into language systems without direct equivalence tend to choose between word-for-word or incorrect translations, which creates problems in their L2 mastery. This practice conflicts with the core principle of Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis because fluent language acquisition requires total immersion in the target language environment. Stengers et al. (2011) demonstrate that translation fosters a comparability perspective rather than promoting linguistic independence, which presents a challenge for advocates who utilize L1 as a mediation tool.

The second thematic issue with translation-based approaches is the reduction of fluency and inadequate contextual adaptation. A research study conducted by Boers (2011) demonstrates that translation helps learners temporarily remember idiomatic meanings but does not create efficient fluency skills for natural language usage during real-time communication. Participants using translation-focused groups produced unnatural and out-of-context translations because they relied on L1 memory rather than natural L2 comprehension. Swain's (1995) Output Hypothesis posits that practical target language production fosters competence, whereas translation hinders

this learning process through rote memorization (Liming, 1990). According to Dawadi (2020), methods that utilize context information help students understand situational meaning indicators, resulting in improved learning retention and enhanced practical skills. That means the inconsistent results acknowledge translation as an ineffective method for teaching EFL while failing to develop essential dynamic language proficiency.

The third theme reveals a major shortcoming of translation-based instruction because it fails to transfer essential sociocultural components found in idioms. Hang (2014) and Tran (2012) argue that idioms are cultural expressions that require an understanding of their original contexts. However, the translation process transforms these words into fixed L1 text equivalents, thereby eliminating their original pragmatic functions. For example, the direct translation of "kick the bucket" lacks appropriateness when used in a language that does not employ idioms related to death, as it removes cultural meanings and casual speech patterns. Therefore, the large cultural gap between languages such as English, Mandarin, and Arabic translates into an insufficient technique in diverse EFL learning spaces. Research demonstrates that translation-based student instruction often fails to effectively teach idioms in the context of social situations until communicative teaching methods involving exposure are employed, which creates more effective solutions (Mekheimer, 2025).

The research outcome contradicts the main argument in the abstract, which posits that translation methods strengthen interpretive learning and cultural understanding. The results demonstrate that this pedagogical method reinforces L1 dependency, resulting in learners being less fluent and less likely to encounter authentic English idiomatic expressions. According to the abstract, translation-based approaches depend on two key success factors: interpretive learning and cultural understanding, which EFL classrooms with diverse populations typically struggle to meet. The evidence suggests that learner-focused approaches, which combine task-based activities with cognitive linguistic strategies (Boers, 2006), effectively promote self-sufficiency and flexibility, eliminating the need for L1 support.

The data confirm that translation methods contradict SLA recommendations because they yield short-term achievement at the expense of long-term, fluent language performance. According to Vygotsky's (1978) beliefs about learning that emerges from social environments, the research supports contextual and communicative techniques as better instructional pathways. The appealing nature of translation in EFL idiom instruction has been undermined by empirical and theoretical evidence, which shows the need for a fresh approach to the practice. The research outcomes influence current educational discussions by recommending that educators adopt teaching methods that build student confidence in dealing with English idioms across diverse cultural contexts.

Recommendations

This secondary qualitative study reveals the major defects of EFL idiom instruction through translation-based teaching methods, as learners experience L1 interference, struggle with fluency, and lose cultural understanding skills. Hence, multiple evidence-based guidelines have emerged to enhance idiomatic acquisition. The recommendations promote student-led learning through contextual and immersive approaches that adhere to principles of second language acquisition, aiming to train culturally competent learners.

First, educators should shift from translation-based pedagogy toward contextual learning strategies. According to Hang (2014) and Tran (2012), incorporating idioms into authentic texts, dialogues, and multimedia materials enables students to discover meaning through real-world cues rather than relying solely on their first language equivalents. Using role-plays alongside narrative analysis helps students retain information more effectively while improving their contextual comprehension skills in response to weaknesses in the translation method. This progress encourages learners to interact with the foreign language without interference, which in turn leads to the development of natural speech patterns.

Learning methods that involve communication should be emphasized to develop pragmatic skills among students. Shea (2017) supports task-based learning because it enables students to apply idioms during practical tasks and discussions—the combination of peer collaboration for

meaning construction suits Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural perspective. Students who learn through communicative methods gain better skills to apply idioms correctly in various contexts because these methods bring L2 dynamics within reach rather than isolating learners through translation.

Implementing cognitive linguistic methods should become part of teaching practice because they enhance deep cultural learning. Liao and Fukuya (2004) suggest studying the origins of idioms, as well as their imagery (such as how "spill the beans" developed), to link language learners to their cultural background without relying on their first language. The method enhances student retention outcomes by addressing the cultural gaps that frequently arise from translation-based teaching.

Finally, teacher training programs should prioritize these alternatives, equipping educators with effective tools to implement immersive strategies. By phasing out reliance on translation, EFL instruction can better serve diverse learners, fostering autonomy and cultural fluency (Işık&Balçıkanlı, 2020). These recommendations collectively offer a robust framework for reimagining idiom pedagogy, ensuring learners thrive in the complexities of English as a foreign language.

Conclusion

This secondary qualitative inquiry analyzed the effective use of translation for teaching idioms in EFL classes by evaluating scholarly work to show their limited teaching value. Research evidence demonstrates that widely chosen instructional approaches do not develop the linguistic abilities and cultural skills necessary to effectively learn English parts of speech. Teachers who rely on L1 interference methods create learning barriers that resonate with their students' native language system but prevent the free acquisition methods described in second language acquisition theories. This fails to substantiate the belief that translation improves interpretive learning, as it only generates dependency while distorting cultural details, which reduces its practical usage in multilingual EFL contexts with substantial linguistic and cultural differences.

Educational research demands a new approach that relies on integrated communicative techniques, harmonizing modern SLA principles based on Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Swain's Output Hypothesis. The research conducted by Boers (2006), Shea (2017), and Tran (2012) demonstrate alternative approaches that enable students to directly handle the L2 through natural meaning discovery and proficient idiom application with cultural appropriateness. Consequently, teaching students to produce English independently and immerse themselves in the culture will create a strong idiomatic command while bypassing translation-based deficits.

The research supports current language education discussions by promoting practice reform and encouraging teachers to adopt teaching approaches that align with the dynamic learning process. The consistent use of translation as the primary teaching method for idioms lacks justification because of the substantial evidence presented against it in this study. The successful acquisition of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) idiom requires autonomous learning combined with cultural experience and local language fluency, which works best through student-led instruction focused on the target language. This conclusion challenges the abstract's optimism and offers a forward-looking vision for optimizing language education in diverse global classrooms.

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