Role of Translation in Language Teaching: Insights from Pakistan's English Language Lecturers

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ABSTRACT

In Pakistan's English language classrooms, translation remains a practical yet contested pedagogical tool. While academic discourse has often marginalized Translation in Language Teaching (TILT) in favor of exclusive target language (L2) instruction, emerging research highlights its potential to strengthen linguistic competence by strategically linking learners' first language (L1) with L2. This qualitative study examines the perceptions and practices of eight English language lecturers from government colleges in Karachi, alongside students' views, regarding the use of translation in English language teaching. Data were gathered through semi-structured lecturer interviews and anonymous end-of-year student feedback questionnaires, and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework. Findings reveal strong support for TILT when applied selectively, recognizing its value as a facilitative tool for L2 learning while cautioning against over-reliance. The study underscores TILT's pedagogical relevance in resource-constrained contexts and recommends future research on structured, balanced integration of translation within communicative and immersive L2 teaching approaches.

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1.   Introduction

Learning in a new language is challenging, and many learners rely on their first language, L1, to comprehend and learn structures necessary to attain fluency in the second language, L2. However, since the end of the 19th century, researchers have discouraged and criticized the use of translation in language teaching and learning (Cook, 2010). Most commonly, the association of Translation in Language Teaching (TILT) with Grammar Translation has "lodged itself so deeply in the collective consciousness" of the language teaching process that it has hindered the development of language teaching entirely (Cook, 2010). However, in recent years, the role of translation in the language classroom has been researched and found effective (Carreres, Noriega-Sánchez, & Pintado Gutiérrez, 2021; Kelly & Bruen, 2015; Leonardi & Salvi, 2016; Nguyen, 2024). Translation is being reevaluated as a useful teaching tool in multicultural and multilingual contexts (Fallas Escobar, 2019). UNESCO's 2003 position paper, *Education in a Multilingual World*, calls for a shift in how multilingualism is viewed, emphasizing that it reflects the everyday reality of many countries worldwide. In the multilingual society of Pakistan, where people speak various languages, the insertion of English words in Urdu sentences is frequent and not at all surprising (Iqbal, 2011). In Pakistan, English is not just a foreign language; it is a second language that is closely related to both academic success and socioeconomic mobility. Students at universities frequently come from backgrounds where English was not the language of everyday communication or instruction in previous schooling. Because of this, learning English is especially difficult and necessitates creative, contextually appropriate teaching methods. Unfortunately, translation is still not well understood in Pakistani higher education, despite its importance. There is little systematic research on how and why it is used, despite anecdotal evidence suggesting that it is widely used. By providing empirical insights from college lecturers who actively integrate translation into their instruction, this study fills this knowledge gap.

Examining how translation is used and viewed in higher education is made possible by Pakistan's rich linguistic diversity and colonial past, which have established English as a language of power. This paper attempts to study how translation is used and viewed in Pakistan's higher education English language classes. It addresses the following questions:

1.   What are the attitudes of higher education English teachers towards the use of TILT?
2.   Are the views of teachers and learners on the use of translation as a language teaching-learning strategy more positive or negative?
3.   What are the underlying assumptions behind the positive and negative views towards the use of translation as a language teaching tool?

This study examines the reasons behind the pedagogical decisions made by eight English lecturers from colleges in Karachi, their opinions on the use of translation, how translation is integrated into classroom activities, and the views of students regarding this strategy.

2.   Literature Review
2.1.   Historical Perspectives on Translation and Language Teaching
The case against translation was built towards the end of the 19th century. Translation became a taboo in the field of language pedagogy, largely rejected in favor of communicative, immersive methods that prioritize teaching in the target language alone (Cook, 2010). Wilhelm Viëtor and other advocates of the Reform Movement vehemently rejected the use of the Grammar Translation (GT) Method in teaching and learning the new language, L2. The emergence of the new language learning theories, such as the Direct Method, suppressed the role of TILT and consequently, any mention of translation and its usefulness in language learning began to disappear from written documents by the end of the nineteenth century (Kelly & Bruen, 2015). Moreover, the rise of innovative teaching methods in the late 20th century, which originated from the Direct Method of language acquisition, has increasingly diminished the significance of TILT. Emphasizing meaning over language form was supported by advocates of the Natural Approach, originating from early second language acquisition theories. This Focus on Meaning method contrasted sharply with the Focus on Form method, which prioritized the grammatical elements and rules of the L2. The Focus on Meaning approach, conversely, emphasized the importance of meaningful L2 communication, focusing on the significance of the message being conveyed. Another teaching method that aimed for meaning along with accuracy of style and grammar developed with the Communicative Approach (Brumfit, 1979). The rise of this method also played a role in the decline of translation in educational practices. This method emerged from language acquisition theories that reflected both functional language use and social linguistic factors(Ahmed, Azhar, & Mohammad, 2024; Mohammad, 2015).

In addition to this, the strong position of the behaviorists and the structuralists regarding the detrimental role of students' L1 in L2 learning indicated that TILT, although not entirely dismissed, became the least preferred instructional method in the audiolingual language classrooms. A comparable method is witnessed in the Communicative Approach, grounded in the idea of "communicative competence" (Lillis, 2006), which recommended a careful application of translation and L1 solely when necessary (Richards and Rodgers 1986, 66, 83). Deterring the use of TILT for L2 educational learning highlighted the "formal ending" of the association between L2 teaching and translation in the twentieth century; "unofficially," though, it allowed ample room for small operations. Nonetheless, although the English-speaking community has often rejected the GT method since the mid-twentieth century, Schjoldager (2004) notes that in certain regions of the world, translation remains commonly utilized in language education. It is especially utilized in secondary education (Cook, 2010), and in nations where the number of native speakers of the target language is limited (Lems, Miller, & Soro, 2017), such as the South Asian countries. Translation has regained credibility in South Asia, where students frequently study English in settings influenced by linguistic diversity(Dhivya et al., 2023; Ragmoun & Alfalih, 2024; Ragmoun, Alfalih, & Alfalih, 2017).

2.2.   Current Use of Translation in Second Language Acquisition
Many perspectives have challenged the teaching effectiveness of monolingual education. More specifically, ongoing cognitive research on bilingualism endorses the notion that a speaker's L1, L2, L3, and various linguistic systems originate from a shared conceptual framework located in the human brain (Cook, 2010). The widespread use of English is highlighted in the TESOL

report, which estimates that nearly 1.5 billion people worldwide are learning the language (Maharjan, 2018). In multilingual communities, strong communication skills are essential because of growing international interactions and daily conversations, leading to a rising interest in translation. Thus, translation plays a crucial role in global communication. It's hard to imagine accessing international news without it. Key messages are quickly translated into numerous languages to ensure effective worldwide communication. As a result, the importance of translation in facilitating understanding is clear—it is an essential tool for transferring information and meaning between languages.

Hence, an emerging wave of advocacy for TILT is on the horizon. Cook (2010) points out that the very criticism presented against TILT ignores the fact that translation can complement the Direct Method of teaching and that the concepts essential to Communicative Teaching completely align with translation teaching (González-Davies, 2004). Translation has regained credibility, particularly in South Asia, where students frequently study English in settings influenced by linguistic diversity. Recent research conducted to examine the effect of translation on students' second language acquisition has further asserted its useful pedagogical function both from the teachers' and students' perspectives. Adil (2020) study of language teachers in Saudi Arabia concludes that using translation as a strategy is effective in building essential communication skills of Saudi language learners. Mahboob and Elyas (2014), along with Alrabai (2014), support this view by emphasizing that translating from Farsi to English aids students in grasping contextual meanings, which subsequently helps them construct more accurate and effective sentences in English. Nguyen (2024) cross-examination of students' written and spoken tasks using translation in Vietnam reaffirms the increased importance of translation in language education.

2.3. The case for TILT in Pakistan's Higher Education
The strong appeal of English as a global language offering economic and personal growth opportunities appears to be a key motivator behind the younger generation's eagerness to learn it in Pakistan (Shamim, 2011). Mansoor (2005) case study on language planning in Pakistan's higher education system offers proof of the strong demand for English language learning among higher-level students in the country. In government colleges across Karachi, English classes are typically held in large, often overcrowded rooms with limited resources. There is usually a prescribed syllabus for teaching English at the college level. Teaching follows a traditional, lecture-style format. The teacher introduces new vocabulary or grammar on the blackboard, explains the material, often in L1 (Urdu), and then moves into reading or writing exercises. With little room for group interaction or spoken practice, students tend to fall back on what works for them - translation. Whether it's translating words, sentences, or even entire concepts into L1, many students use this method to help them understand the content and keep up with the pace of the class. For most, it's not a matter of choice but of necessity, especially when their L2 (English) foundation is weak or inconsistent. Although not always officially acknowledged as translation, Iqbal (2011) points out that teachers naturally use code-switching to aid student comprehension even at the undergraduate level. Translation is considered a time-efficient method of teaching and testing the L2 as a controlled task (Duff, 1989). Cook (2010) contends that TILT is one of the few approaches that can be used in large class composition. He also argues that this approach is appropriate for instructors who lack strong L2 skills and that its systematic and consistent structure fosters a sense of accomplishment among learners. It is a helpful tool for raising contrastive language awareness and helps students improve their linguistic accuracy and agility, especially at a higher level.

3. Methodology
3.1. Research Design
The research design adopted in this study was a qualitative case study that was designed to understand the attitudes and classroom practices of lecturers of the English language towards the adoption of translation as a language teaching strategy in government colleges in Pakistan. Case studies especially lend themselves to comprehending a complex interaction of these three factors of teacher beliefs, institutional culture, and pedagogical choice (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Based on the original model created by Kelly and Bruen (2015), the proposed localised variant aimed at studying the issue of translation in a setting in which English is a second language (L2) and Urdu, the national language, is the primary first language (L1) of students and instructors.

3.2. Setting and Participants

The research took place in eight government colleges located in Karachi, the largest city in Pakistan, and the most linguistically diverse city. These colleges are under the Board of Intermediate Education Karachi (BIEK), and they provide primarily instruction in English.

Table 1: Institutional Profile of Participants

Lecturer ID	Gender	Years of Experience	Teaching Level	Highest Qualification
L1	Female	12 years	Y1 and Y2	MPhil English
L2	Male	10 years	Y2	MA English Literature
L3	Female	8 years	Y1 and Y2	MA Applied Linguistics
L4	Male	15 years	Y1	PhD Linguistics
L5	Female	11 years	Y1 and Y2	MPhil TESOL
L6	Male	9 years	Y1 and Y2	MA English Literature
L7	Female	14 years	Y1	MA ELT
L8	Male	7 years	Y1 and Y2	MA English Literature

3.3. Data Collection Procedures

Data for this study were collected through two primary methods.

(1) Individual semi-structured interviews with all eight participating lecturers.
(2) Anonymous student feedback questionnaires administered at the end of the academic year.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in March–April 2025 and lasted between 35 - 50 minutes. Each lecturer participated in a one-on-one interview with the researchers, conducted in English with occasional use of Urdu where participants felt it aided clarity or expression. The interview items were adapted from Kelly and Bruen (2015) and included questions on whether lecturers used translation in language teaching, the direction of translation (L1→L2, L2→L1, or both), the modes employed (spoken or written), their pedagogical rationale, perceived advantages and disadvantages, and any inclusion of translation in assessment. Interviews also explored lecturers' own experiences of learning an L2, including whether translation had been part of their language learning.

The second source of data comprised anonymous end-of-year student feedback questionnaires. These were distributed to students enrolled in the participating lecturers' English language classes. The questionnaires sought students' perceptions of translation as a pedagogical tool, including what they found useful, engaging, or challenging, and their views on how translation impacted their language learning. Responses were collected voluntarily, with no identifying information, to encourage candid feedback. In total, 80 completed questionnaires were collected and included in the analysis. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant institutional review body. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was secured from all lecturers prior to interviews. Students were informed that their questionnaire responses would be used only for research purposes and would remain anonymous.

3.4. Data Analysis

Analysis was conducted separately for the lecturer interviews and the student questionnaires before integrating the findings. For the lecturer interviews, all audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and reviewed for accuracy. Following Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis framework, the transcripts were read repeatedly for familiarization. Initial open coding was carried out to identify segments of text relevant to the study's research questions. Codes were then organized into broader categories, which were refined into final themes representing lecturers' attitudes, practices, and contextual influences. For the student questionnaires, open-ended responses were read in full and coded inductively. Short descriptive labels were assigned to recurring ideas, such as "improves understanding," "builds vocabulary," "reduces anxiety," and "creates dependency." The frequency of each theme was noted to gauge the prevalence of particular perceptions among the student respondents. Representative quotations were extracted to illustrate key points. The two datasets were then compared to identify points of convergence and divergence. For example, while lecturers frequently emphasized the risk of over-reliance on translation, student responses more often stressed its value for comprehension and vocabulary learning. This comparative approach allowed the study

to cross-check perspectives and generate a more nuanced understanding of the role of translation in the English language classroom in the Pakistani government college context.

4.   Results
4.1.   Summary of key themes

Table 2 illustrates the profiles of the eight English Lecturers interviewed from various government colleges of Karachi, all of which follow the curriculum and syllabus prescribed by the Board of Intermediate Education Karachi (BIEK). The table describes the general views on the use of translation as a language-teaching tool in English language lessons, the linguistic backgrounds of he participants (whether they are primary or secondary language users of the target language, and if they have any background of learning a language through means of translation themselves), and the participants' views in relation to TILT (whether they use TILT and/or formally assess it).

Table 2: Participant Responses

Participant	Views on the use of translation as a language-teaching strategy	Linguistic Background		Views on the role of translation in language learning	
	Favourable/ Unfavourable	Primary or Secondary speaker of the student's L2	Personal experience with learning a language through translation	Uses Translation as a teaching device	Conducts formal evaluation based on translation
English Lecturers – Year I and II					
1	Favourable	secondary	yes	always	sometimes
2	Favourable	secondary	yes	always	no
3	Favourable	secondary speaker of students' L1 and L2	yes	always	no
4	Favourable	secondary	yes	always	no
5	Favourable	secondary	yes	always	no
6	Favourable	secondary speaker of student's L1 and L2	yes	always	yes
7	Favourable	secondary speaker of student's L1 and L2	yes	always	no
8	positive	secondary	yes	always	no

As mentioned in Table 2, the qualitative data gathered from participant interviews are elaborated in the following section under each main heading. Views on the use of translation as a language teaching tool and its role in the language learning process are combined under the first section to better organize the qualitative answers received from the participants. The first section also contains the considerations regarding the pros and cons of using TILT and its formal evaluation. The second section discusses the linguistic background and other background factors associated with the primary and secondary language use of the participants and their own background of acquiring a language through TILT. The third section further discusses responses gathered from students' end-of-term anonymous feedback questionnaires.

4.2.   Views on the use of translation and its role in the language teaching-learning process
4.2.1. Use in teaching

The views of all eight lecturers were in favour of the use of translation as a pedagogical tool in language teaching. Both Year I and Year II English teachers were quite comfortable with the explicit use of translation in their English lectures.

4.2.2. Vocabulary Acquisition

Seven out of the eight lecturers made direct references to the importance of translation in facilitating vocabulary building, with remarks like the one below being typical of the sample as a whole.

"It is very useful for learning English words, especially in Year I.

Vocabulary-building exercises using translation increase familiarity and add a lot to students' word bank, which helps in meeting the syllabus and board exam objectives."

4.2.3. Contextualized use of language

Five of the participants emphasized the value of translation in making the students understand the context in which specific words and phrases can be used. When asked why they use TILT, one lecturer responded that it helps them *"contextualize the use of the English language and its expressions."*

4.2.4. Comprehension and Response

Comprehension was another important feature highlighted by six of the participants in the study. They spoke about how TILT aided student comprehension and responses. One of the participants gave a comment that sums up the notion possessed by most.

"Translation gives me the certainty that the students have understood the topic. Most students do not speak willingly when asked to respond in L2. Through translation, I can check comprehension even amongst the most reluctant language learners."

4.2.5. Understanding Grammar Structures

The participants also stressed how translation exercises added to students' familiarity with grammatical structures when practicing L2. Two lecturers highlighted that their students seemed to enjoy it whenever they used translation exercises in class, and most *"scored high in their evaluation of the tasks."*

4.2.6. Pedagogy and Variety

Finally, three lecturers emphasized the utility of translation as a tool for teaching in ESL. They revealed how they use TILT to highlight specific cultural issues and to make their lectures more diverse. One of the two lecturers in question elaborated on this point by explaining that "*translation can serve as a useful element within a diverse language teaching methodology*". They noted that each group consists of students who have diverse learning attitudes and needs, and using an eclectic approach enables them to address the majority of these differences when designing their language lessons.

4.2.7. Views concerning the overuse of translation

While all eight lecturers showed overwhelmingly favourable attitudes towards the use of translation in language teaching (TILT), one major point of concern was to use translation in moderation to avoid students' excessive reliance on it. Most lecturers were of the view that translation should assist in understanding and not in production. One of the lecturers stated that they use translation in addition to a variety of other teaching techniques, and not as the sole teaching tool. Similar views were expressed by other participants.

"If students perform too many translation exercises it could be detrimental to their learning. They start relying on translation and stop making any attempts to understand things themselves."

"Pakistani students do not think in English. Using translation too frequently will give them the idea that everything in the Urdu language can be said as it is in English, which isn't true."

"Students may form the tendency to think in Urdu and work from the L1. I want my students to identify and understand the English sentence on their own, without using the L1 first."

Despite these concerns, English lecturers showed positive behaviours towards TILT use. They explained that in Karachi, TILT is successful due to an overwhelming desire to learn and use the language by the students. College and university-level students in Pakistan consider being proficient in English as key to achieving their academic, social, and career goals. It gives them the opportunity to access international research and participate in global forums. Some even link it with self-worth and career advancement. Despite social and economic obstacles, they are motivated to learn the language, often using online tools and applications, and enrolling in language proficiency courses in various language institutes.

4.2.8. Assessment Practices
Most lecturers denied the inclusion of a translation component in formal assessment. Recent revisions in the BIEK English exam for year I and year II have excluded the translation component. However, previously the Karachi Board English Part I included five Urdu/Sindhi sentences to be translated to English in Section C of the paper, and English Part II paper included an Urdu/Sindhi paragraph to be translated to English in its Section C. Nonetheless, two lecturers admitted to the use of translation as part of the college pre-board assessments.

4.2.9. Lecturers' experience of TILT
All eight lecturers of this study had experience in their language learning, the use of translation, and found it to be extremely effective in their L2 or L3 acquisition. They described its contribution as positive in terms of improved comprehension, vocabulary enhancement and understanding of grammatical structures.

4.3. Students' Attitudes toward the Use of Translation
The anonymous end-of-year feedback questionnaires offered detailed insights into students' perceptions of translation activities in their English language classes. Of the 80 completed questionnaires, the majority reflected a positive stance toward translation as a pedagogical tool, with only a small number expressing concerns about over-reliance on the mother tongue.

More than half of the respondents (n = 52) stated that translation greatly improved their comprehension of lesson content, enabling them to connect new English material to their prior linguistic knowledge in Urdu. As one respondent explained:

"When the teacher explains in Urdu or asks us to translate, I understand the topic much better and remember it longer."

Similarly, 46 students emphasized translation's role in vocabulary acquisition, noting that the process of linking English terms with their Urdu equivalents and contextual usage accelerated their learning. One student observed:

"I learn new words faster when I know their Urdu meaning and how to use them in a sentence."

Table 3: Student Perceptions of Translation as a Teaching Strategy

Student Response Theme	Frequency (n)	Sample Comment
Improves comprehension	52	*"When the teacher explains in Urdu or asks us to translate, I understand better."*
Builds vocabulary	46	*"I learn new words faster when I know their Urdu meaning and usage."*
Increases confidence	29	*"Translation helps me feel less nervous about difficult passages."*
Reduces anxiety	22	*"I am more comfortable when I can check the meaning in Urdu."*
Encourages dependency	14	*"I sometimes wait for the teacher to explain in Urdu instead of thinking in English."*

A further 29 respondents associated translation activities with increased confidence in tackling challenging texts, reporting that it lowered anxiety and allowed them to participate more actively in class discussions. Conversely, 14 students expressed reservations, warning that frequent translation might foster dependency on Urdu explanations, thus reducing opportunities for independent L2 thinking. Overall, students perceived translation as a supportive and motivating aid, especially for comprehension, vocabulary building, and confidence, while recognizing the importance of balancing its use with immersive English-only activities.

5. Discussion

The extremely positive responses received from the eight English lecturers in this study highlight the increasing recognition of translation as a useful teaching strategy in language classrooms. Important benefits identified by the lecturers of Karachi government colleges concerning the use of TILT in their English lessons were vocabulary acquisition, contextualized language learning, improved comprehension, and a better grasp of grammar structures. These observations are in line with the findings of previous researchers who concluded that translation enhanced communication by strengthening learners' lexical knowledge (Adil, 2020), enabled language learners to understand the context more thoroughly by associating language structures to culturally relevant concepts (Alrabai, 2014; Mahboob & Elyas, 2014), and enhanced spoken and written production of students with a more analytical approach to the use of the language (Nguyen, 2024). The participants further pointed out that translation added variety to their teaching methods and helped them cater to the diverse learners in their language class. However, the lecturers' primary caution is to use translation in moderation to assist student's L2 acquisition and not allow students' to become over-reliant on their L1. The student feedback in this study underscores the pedagogical relevance of translation in L2 English instruction within the Pakistani government college context. The overwhelmingly positive responses, particularly in relation to improved comprehension and vocabulary acquisition, align with earlier findings by Brooks-Lewis (2009), who reported that translation facilitates deeper lexical retention and enhances learner confidence. Students' emphasis on reduced anxiety suggests that translation may serve an affective function, providing psychological reassurance and lowering the affective filter, thus enabling more effective engagement with English texts. Notably, the perception of translation as a scaffold for learning rather than a crutch reflects an understanding of its strategic value, even among learners themselves. However, the minority view cautioning against dependency resonates with concerns raised in the literature about over-reliance on L1 potentially hindering L2 autonomy (Edstrom, 2006). This dual perception suggests that while students appreciate translation's role in supporting comprehension and participation, they also recognize the need for a balanced integration with immersive, English-only tasks. Therefore, pedagogical frameworks in this context may benefit from deliberately incorporating translation as a transitional support mechanism while gradually fostering independent L2 processing skills.

Overall, the feedback and insights obtained from both the lecturers and the students establish the effectiveness of translation as a teaching-learning technique in the ESL classroom, when used judiciously. It can help learners draw connections between their first language (L1) and the target language (L2), deepen their understanding of vocabulary and grammar, and clarify context. However, to avoid students becoming overly reliant on translation, it's important to use it strategically rather than as a constant crutch. Teachers should balance translation with immersive activities like speaking, listening, and contextual learning to encourage learners to think directly in the L2. Ultimately, translation should support, not replace, active language use.

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