



The Effectiveness of Translation-Based Tasks on ESP Comprehension of Thai Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

The purposes of this study were 1. to assess the effectiveness of the translation-based tasks in enhancing undergraduate students' comprehension of contents in English for Specific Purposes subjects and 2. to examine their satisfaction with this instructional approach. This quantitative research employed a one-group pre-test and post-test design with 45 undergraduate students at the A1–A2 proficiency level. The participants' scores on the pre- and post-tests were analyzed using a dependent t-test to measure the effectiveness of the intervention and the participants' satisfaction was measured using a five-point Likert-scale questionnaire. The data was analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation). The results of the study showed that the translation-based tasks significantly improved students' comprehension, with mean scores increasing from 14.53 (pre-test) to 26.49 (post-test), $t = 29.84$, $p < 0.001$. Regarding satisfaction, students reported a high level of satisfaction with the translation-based tasks ($M = 4.40$, $SD = 0.60$), particularly in terms of content understanding, classroom engagement, and ease of learning. These findings suggest that the translation-based tasks can serve as an effective pedagogical tool for teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP), especially for learners with limited English proficiency.

Keywords: Effectiveness, English for Specific Purposes, Translation-Based Tasks

Introduction

Effective English communication in the workplace is an increasingly important skill in today's global economy. First, if professionals have effective workplace English skills, they can communicate effectively in international business settings such as company presentations, negotiations, and collaboration in international or cross-cultural contexts (Evans, 2010). Second, having effective workplace English skills leads to increased



career development opportunities. Many companies now prefer to hire or employ those who can communicate confidently with international clients and partners (Young & Post, 1993). Third, having effective English communication in the workplace has a positive impact on organizational performance by reducing miscommunication and allowing for better information-sharing across culturally diverse teams (Bargiela-Chiappini & Zhang, 2013). Therefore, to effectively meet the demands of using English in the workplace, effective English language teaching and learning is essential.

Nevertheless, there are several obstacles that English major students face in acquiring English communication skills in workplace contexts. First, students tend to have difficulty printing specialized vocabulary and terminology associated with professional contexts, which drifts significantly from established English vocabulary (Hyland, 2006). Second, many students are not familiar with authentic workplace communication contexts which makes it difficult for them to access the pragmatic features of professional discourse and register (Basturkmen, 2015). Third, many students are anxious and less confident in trying to perform when using English communication skills in a simulated workplace context due to low practice and fear of failure (Khamkhien, 2010).

Previous studies have shown that the strategic use of translation-based tasks can be a valuable tool in tackling these issues. First, these activities can act as a cognitive bridge, allowing students to link their L1 knowledge with new L2 concepts for better understanding (Cook, 2010). Second, a gradual approach using structured translation exercises can reduce cognitive load and anxiety, as students can focus on meaning rather than just form (Butzkamm & Caldwell, 2009). Third, carefully designed translation activities allow students to develop metalinguistic awareness by comparing how L1 and L2 structures are organized (Leonardi, 2010).

The integration of translation tasks into ESP lessons has the potential to address several of the previously identified challenges. First, translation-based tasks provide students with immediate support for comprehension by allowing them to use their first language to access complicated workplace ideas before they turn to the English equivalents (Kerr, 2014). Second, this instructional method develops students' confidence slowly by using a familiar language to practice their new professional language and literature (Weschler, 1997). Thirdly, translation activities can be constructed to address workplace communication needs so they are more meaningful and purposeful to students regarding their professional development (Pym et al., 2013).

Grounded in principles, i.e. cognitive scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978) and meaningful learning (Ausubel, 2000), the present study investigated the pedagogical use of integrating structured translation tasks into workplace communication lessons in an ESP course. This study developed and assessed a series of English to Thai translation activities designed to address the specific comprehension challenges faced by low-proficiency



learners. In other words, this study explored how these targeted tasks can improve undergraduate students' understanding of English in workplace contexts, as well as their satisfaction with this instructional approach.

The purposes of this study are:

1. To assess the effectiveness of translation-based tasks in enhancing undergraduate students' content comprehension in an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course.
2. To examine students' satisfaction with the use of translation-based tasks.

Literature Review

1. Translation-based tasks

The translation technique refers to a holistic pedagogical approach in which translation activities are systematically integrated between students' first language and the target language to support understanding and learning (Richards & Rogers, 2014). At its core, the technique of using translation in language teaching originates from the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM), one of the most traditional pedagogical approaches. This method was first utilized in the 16th century for teaching Latin and Greek in Europe and was later applied to English and French instruction in the eighteenth century (Yuan, 2025). However, a significant drawback of this approach is that it does not prioritize developing fluency for real-world situations. As a result, GTM is chiefly concerned with written materials and reading skills, largely neglecting authentic communication (Tsegaye, 2023). Translation-based tasks are oriented towards the future based on the traditional grammar translation-based tasks to be a purposeful cognitive tool that will help learners process, understand and remember new linguistic and conceptual knowledge (Carreres, 2006). Not only does modern translation involve a mechanical task, but it also focuses on employing learners' first language strategically as a means to make meaning and develop metalinguistic knowledge (Cook, 2010).

Contemporary definitions of translation moves language teaching forward because they highlight communicative and cognitive contributions to the language learning process. Kerr (2014) describes translation-based tasks as "a pedagogical means which would link two languages together and promote understanding of the linguistic simultaneity and cultural elements." Similarly, Widdowson (2003) conceptualizes translation as "a meaning-making activity which promotes active cognitive processing rather than a substantially passive linguistic operation". The contemporary definitions of translation-based tasks allow for a proper understanding of the meaning-making dynamic that is methodological, interactive, and relational to support both second language acquisition and content understanding in ESP contexts.



2. Cognitive Scaffolding Principle

Translation tasks can be considered a temporary physical structure that provides cognition through the learner's stronger language, helping them be able to process complex content systematically before looking to transfer the understanding to their weaker language (Vygotsky, 1978; Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). Scaffolding is a key part of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which demonstrates what a learner can do with assistance versus what they can do on their own or without assistance (Shabani, Khatib, & Ebadi, 2010). It is important to note that in the scaffolding process, teachers gradually withdraw support while students develop competence to a level of independence in the target language (Walqui, 2006).

The scaffolding principle endorses the notion that learners come with different linguistic competencies and the appropriate scaffolding will assist learners to reach this proficiency. In sociocultural theory, effective scaffolding is contingent upon the learner's existing levels of development-be responsive and fade out support as the learner increases independence (Van de Pol, Volman, & Beishuizen, 2010). The other element of scaffolding as a principle in ESP, is that it allows students to use some of their existing knowledge while learning a specific vocabulary and discourse regimes.

3. Meaningful Learning Principle

Translating texts provides meaningful and authentic contexts for language use, which makes the learning process significantly more engaging and purposeful for students (Ausubel, 1968). According to Ausubel (2000), meaningful learning occurs when the learner meaningfully associates the new information into an existing cognitive structure, as opposed to being able to remember the information without any meaningful understanding of it. Translation activities can serve as a scaffolding tool that can link new concepts in the target language to what the learners already know about concepts in their native language, allowing the learner to fit together new learning and their existing cognitive structures (Novak, 2010).

In ESP contexts, meaningful learning happens when the translation activities relate directly to the learners' professional or academic needs which makes the learning experience relevant and motivating (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). Mazeikiene (2018) reported that using translation as a teaching method in ESP courses can enhance comprehension of specialized texts, enriches vocabulary and grammar mastery, and fosters intercultural competence without requiring formal translation theory expertise. Likewise, Fehaima (2022) found that Translation in ESP courses bridges learners' native language and specialized L2 terminology to enhance comprehension, reinforce precision and analytic skills, and boost motivation and professional readiness.



4. Benefits of Translation-based tasks

The benefits of translation-based tasks in ESP contexts are multifaceted and empirically supported, encompassing cognitive, affective, linguistic, cultural, and pedagogical dimensions.

5. Enhanced Comprehension

Translation improves comprehension by providing instant meaning, or access to comprehension, especially for students who are novice users of the target language (Cook, 2010; Kerr, 2014). The immediate meaning support reduces cognitive load so that students can focus their mental ability on understanding the meaning of what they are reading, rather than struggling with language (Widdowson, 2003). Previous studies on cognitive load theory, have shown that when learners have support from the L1 to help reduce extraneous cognitive load, they can then allocate additional cognitive resources to make sense of their previous knowledge, and build on new learning (Sweller, Ayres & Kalyuga, 2011).

6. Reduced Anxiety and Increased Confidence

Translation reduced anxiety and increased confidence by using familiar or known language from which students can better explore new concepts (Schweers, 1999; Atkinson, 1993). This is especially useful in ESP contexts where students must learn and use not only complex content, but a specialized language (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). Studies regarding anxiety distinguish between the negative aspects of anxiety on the learning process and the positive potential influences on student learning and learning environment. There are many related studies on language anxiety that show that by using L1 strategically, it can create an environment that enhances learning, provides opportunities for students to take risks, and creates opportunities for student participation (Horwitz, 2001).

7. The Development of Critical Thinking Skills

Translation promotes critical thinking and analytical skills because, by definition, students are always analyzing, interpreting, and transferring meaning, across two or more language systems and cultures (Colina, 2003; Venuti, 2017). Successful translating requires students to be processing at a level that will generate these skills. Successful students must also engage in deep cognitive processing, compare or contrast linguistic structures, contexts, and systems of meaning (Baker, 2018). The analytical nature of the type of cognitive processing required for translation tasks develops higher-order thinking skills.

8. Previous Studies on Translation-based tasks

A number of evidence-based studies have also supported translation-based approaches to language teaching and learning in a variety of contexts and types of learners. Laufer & Girsai (2008) conducted a quasi-experimental study that compared vocabulary acquisition with sixty intermediate EFL learners using translation-



based instruction to traditional instruction where learners were instructed to avoid their L1. The results showed that students were in the translation condition substantially outperformed traditionally taught students and large effect sizes indicate the practical significance of translation as a cognitive aid. The authors argued that the results were largely due to the learners' cognitive ability to engage in a deeper mental processing of the words being learned by switching back and forth from their L1 to L2, and ultimately resulted in them retaining the vocabulary more easily.

Likewise, Popović (2001) investigated the effectiveness of translation in ESP contexts by conducting a study with 72 Croatian university students of Business English. One group of students received instruction that was visible through translation whereas the control group received instruction through communicative methods without translation. The results were in favor of the translation group with significantly higher post-test scores for both language accuracy and content comprehension. Qualitative data collected through interviews were also found to support translation. Some students said that translation led to a better understanding of the meanings of business terms and led to greater professional self-confidence overall.

Furthermore, González Davies (2004) performed a longitudinal study across one academic year with 96 Spanish-speaking learners of ESP in tourism. The experimental group used translation-based instruction and the control group received traditional ESP instruction. The results showed significant gains in reading comprehension (Cohen's $d = 1.23$), vocabulary knowledge, ($d = 0.98$) and communicative competence ($d = 0.87$) for the translation group. Qualitative results confirmed the ability to use translation to understand the nuances of culture and register distinctions in tourism-related communication.

Carreres (2014) also demonstrated the effects of the study on translation in her pre-test/post-test study with 45 Spanish law students learning legal English. After 6 weeks using translation-based activities, students could identify that the improvement they had achieved in legal text comprehension (pre-test $M = 42.3$, $SD = 8.7$; post-test $M = 71.6$, $SD = 9.2$), $t(44) = 18.73$, $p < 0.001$, was both statistically significant and possessed a very large effect size (Cohen's $d = 3.47$). Students also reported improved awareness of the discourse of legal communication, as well as ease while engaging with bilingual terminologies.

In addition, Hatam and Shafiei (2012) examined the role of translation in developing language skills with an emphasis on the implications for ESP students in Iranian universities. The study demonstrated that translation activities benefited and developed their retention of technical vocabulary and enhanced their understanding of specialized texts. The students acknowledged how translation connected their theoretical knowledge of the language with their new real-world uses of language at the work-based level. Furthermore, Ayuningtyas, Mauludin, and Prasetyo (2022) assessed the effectiveness of an ESP course directed at Iranian mechanical



engineering students. The findings indicated that translation tasks improved technical translation skills and developed domain-based comprehension. The students also showed increased satisfaction and interest which aligns with arguments of the pedagogical significance of translation in technical or ESP environments.

These studies collectively suggest that translation-based tasks can develop language and ESP in the discipline areas, particularly between comprehension of vocabulary knowledge, and cultural knowledge/connections, but they do have limitations. Most of the studies reviewed and analyze learners at the higher level of proficiency within the specialized disciplines and therefore there is now a notable gap in research into the effectiveness of translation-based tasks for the low English proficiency workplace communication learner. This current study has the aim of filling this gap.

Methodology

This study employed a one-group pre-test/post-test research design to investigate the effectiveness of translation-based tasks in improving students' comprehension of English workplace communication. Additionally, a satisfaction survey was conducted to examine students' perceptions of the translation-based tasks.

1. Population and Participants: The population for this study consisted of 169 second-year students majoring in English. From this population, an intact class of 45 undergraduate students enrolled in the "English Communication in the Workplace" course was chosen as the sample group. The participants' proficiency level was determined to be between A1 and A2 on the CEFR scale, based on their initial placement test scores and academic records.

2. Research Instruments: This study used two main research tools, including Pre-test and Post-test and a satisfaction questionnaire.

2.1 A multiple-choice test with 30 questions was developed to check how well students understood English communication in the workplace prior to and after the intervention. The test was carefully validated by three experts in teaching ESP courses and English Language Teaching (ELT) field. The questions were found to be very suitable, with Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) scores ranging from 0.67 to 1.00, showing strong content validity. The level of difficulty for the questions ranged from 0.67 to 0.93, and their ability to tell apart stronger and weaker students (discrimination index) ranged from 0.14 to 0.57. The overall reliability of the test, measured using the KR-20 formula, was 0.80, which means the test was very consistent.

2.2 A short questionnaire with 10 questions was designed to investigate how satisfied students were with the translation-based tasks. A five-point rating scale was employed, where 1 meant "not satisfied" and 5



meant “very satisfied” Experts also reviewed this questionnaire to make sure it matched the study goals, and the IOC showed it was valid. Its reliability, checked using Cronbach's alpha, was 0.87, showing that the questionnaire was very reliable.

3. Data Collection Procedures: The data collection process was carried out in three sequential phases:

3.1 Pre-test Administration At the beginning of the second semester in 2023, prior to the instructional intervention, students were administered a pre-test to assess their initial comprehension of English communication in workplace contexts. The assessment duration was 90 minutes.

3.2 Intervention Phase During the intervention period, students received instruction in the English Communication in the Workplace course using the translation-based tasks. This phase covered three instructional chapters delivered over several weeks. The translation-based tasks incorporated structured English to Thai translation exercises integrated directly into the course content to support comprehension.

3.3 Post-test and Questionnaire Administration Upon completion of the instructional period, students were administered the post-test under the same conditions as the pre-test (90 minutes). In addition, they completed a satisfaction questionnaire designed to measure their perceptions of the translation-based tasks, which required approximately 30 minutes to complete.

4. Data Analysis: The quantitative data collected from a questionnaire was analyzed via SPSS software to find the effectiveness of and the students’ perceptions towards the intervention. The researchers compared the pre- and post-test scored using the dependent t-test, while Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were calculated for satisfaction questionnaire responses. Statistical significance was set at $\alpha = 0.05$.

5. Statistics used in this research: include descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation (SD).

Results

Regarding the first purpose of the study to examine the effectiveness of translation-based tasks on student comprehension, the results from the pre-test and post-test comparison were shown in Table 1 and the dependent t-test was shown in Table 2 as follows

Table 1 Comparison of Pre-test and Post-test Scores

Measure	Pre-test	Post-test	Mean Difference
Mean Score	14.53	26.49	11.96
Standard Deviation	2.87	1.42	-
Minimum Score	9	24	-
Maximum Score	20	28	-



Table 1 presents the comparison between pre-test and post-test scores for the 45 participants. The findings show a notable improvement in participant scores following the intervention. The mean score increased substantially from 14.53 on the pre-test to 26.49 on the post-test, resulting in a mean difference of 11.96.

Table 2 Dependent t-test Results

Number of Pairs	Pre-test Mean	Post-test Mean	t-value	df	p-value
45	14.53	26.49	29.84	44	< 0.001

Table 2 presents the results of the dependent t-test analysis comparing pre-test and post-test performance. The results indicate a statistically significant improvement in students' comprehension scores from pre-test to post-test, $t(44) = 29.84, p < 0.001$. The effect size (Cohen's $d = 6.24$) indicates an extremely large practical significance, suggesting that the translation-based tasks had a substantial impact on student learning outcomes.

When it comes to the participants' satisfaction with the translation-based tasks, the results from the questionnaire were reported in Table 3 below.

Table 3 Student Satisfaction with Translation-based tasks

Survey Item	\bar{x}	S.D.	Interpretation
1. Understand vocabulary in lessons	4.48	0.51	High
2. Understand grammar in lessons	4.37	0.55	High
3. Understand lesson content	4.63	0.49	Highest
4. Confidence in answering classroom questions	4.09	0.74	High
5. Confidence in communicating with instructor	4.17	0.66	High
6. Feel relaxed during classroom learning	4.29	0.83	High
7. Lessons are not boring	4.56	0.50	Highest
8. Motivated to attend classes	4.60	0.50	Highest
9. Positive feelings toward instructor	4.19	0.73	High
10. English learning made easier	4.63	0.49	Highest
Overall Satisfaction	4.40	0.60	High

Table 3 presents the results of the satisfaction survey regarding students' experiences with translation-based tasks. The satisfaction survey results reveal consistently high ratings across all measured dimensions. Students demonstrated highest satisfaction with content understanding ($M = 4.63$), ease of learning ($M = 4.63$),



motivation to attend classes ($M = 4.60$), and finding lessons engaging ($M = 4.56$). The lowest, though still high, satisfaction rating was for confidence in answering classroom questions ($M = 4.09$).

Conclusion

The results of this study can be summarized based on the following objectives:

1. The translation-based tasks can effectively facilitate English communication workplace comprehension for undergraduate students. The results had statistically significant increases in test score from pre- to post-test, and high levels of satisfaction with the overall learning, suggest that translation activities can address cognitive and affective barriers associated with English for Specific Purposes. The nearly large effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.624$) illustrates that the transitional method was not only statistically significant but also practically significant. In short, the transitional method provided not only statistically measurable changes, but meaningful improvement in students' comprehension of English workplace communication. The intervention proved to be effective for all participants consistently

2. The high student satisfaction levels substantiate the affective benefits of translation-based approaches. Students reported positive attitudes toward the approach indicating increased confidence, decreased anxiety, and increased engagement with the learning materials.

In conclusion, these findings indicate that translation can be utilized as a potential, legitimate and strategic avenue in course design for ESP courses, especially for learners with lower levels of proficiency or when assigned a complex set of workplace communications. Teachers can be encouraged to implement structured opportunities for translations into their courses to encourage student learning outcomes, enhance comprehension for the learner and minimize affective factors. In doing so, translation can be both a gateway to comprehension and confidence when utilizing language in a contextualized professional setting.

Discussion

1. The results of this research provide robust evidence on the results of translation-based tasks with regards to student understanding of English in workplace communication and lead to a mean score increase from 14.53 to 26.49, an 82.3% improvement reflecting marked improvement with just a small sample of training.

2. The results in this research were consistent with Laufer and Girsai's (2008) research documenting improvements when translation-based tasks and principles were included in their programs providing empirical evidence for language pedagogy.



3. The results support the argument that translation based instructional models may be useful for weaker learners, specifically A1- A2 learners, since understanding professional discourse requires understanding a complex set of contextual and experiential learning, and translation-based tasks create space for faculty to facilitate learner understanding of ESP components using native language as a cognitive structure.

4. This is further supported by research that shows lower-level learners are able to improve their focus on text and content when partaking in the translation of a text from one language to another (Hatam & Shafiei, 2012; Cumming, 1989).

5. The overall level of satisfaction with the translation-based tasks was relatively high overall ($M = 4.40$) on the satisfaction survey, with the highest ratings for the improving content understanding and ease of learning which align with the two purposes of the intervention.

6. The overall motivation scores suggest that translation based-simulations could provide benefits beyond improving comprehension, such as increasing engagement and participation in the ESP course which has been identified in the literature as a psychological and motivational factor when using native language support in ESP programs (Shih, 2020; Shadieff and Huang, 2022; Jafari and Shokrpour, 2013).

7. Translation based-simulations not only have the potential to promote and improve comprehension but also language development and writing, and higher order thinking skills (Mazeikiene, 2018), which some claim that translation could be classified as a “fifth skill” beyond reading, writing, listening and speaking.

8. The translation method fits well with assessing language ability, validly and reliably, particularly in similar ESP content assessment which links content understanding with producing language (speaking/writing); it could serve as a pedagogical and assessment choice in the classroom.

9. The slightly lower confidence ratings in answering questions in class suggest that while translation-based tasks improve comprehension, additional strategies may be required to develop communicative confidence, consistent with Butzkamm and Caldwell's (2009) observation that translation-based tasks provide cognitive support but additional communicative activities may be necessary to develop speaking confidence.

Discoveries of new knowledge

This research has demonstrated that using translation techniques in ESP subjects can genuinely develop English learners. An interesting finding from this study is that using translation tasks as a scaffolding tool can effectively help learners draw upon their existing English knowledge to learn jargon related to English in the workplace. This is because learners are not learning vocabulary through rote memorization, as in traditional teaching methods, but are engaging in effective, meaningful learning through translation.



Suggestions

1. Suggestions for classroom application

1.1 The results suggest that translation-based tasks can work as a potential scaffold for students in the lower English proficiency levels (A1–A2). One major endorsement of translation activities in ESP instruction is that they provide cognitive bridges between the content in the students' native language, and the English content in their target language. This allows students to learn complex workplace communication concepts using the cognitive comfort of their other language.

1.2 The satisfaction ratings seemed to indicate translation-based tasks may address the affective factors frequently found in ESP that has prevented ESP students' learning (such as anxiety and demotivation). The previous satisfaction ratings indicate, the students may have experienced a degree of support that would motivate them forward into more challenging content. Lastly, the general improvement in comprehension confirmed the use of translation-based tasks was especially important in ESP focused on content where understanding specific key concepts is central to the course like in my case, where the course content was related to top job functions in the labour market and workplace communication.

Thus, it is recommended to incorporate the use of translation activities into an ESP curriculum development process and programs, where the intended outcome is workplace communication, among other occupational language features.

2. Limitations of this study and Suggestions for future research

2.1 This study utilized a one-group design in the absence of a control group, so one cannot be certain that the improvements that occurred in the participants' listening and reading comprehension were due solely to the intervention of the translation-based tasks. Future research should employ randomized controlled designs to assist in causal inferences.

2.2 This study only looked at comprehension outcomes and did not assess productive skills such as speaking and writing. Future research should measure the impact of translation-based tasks on a variety of language skills for further understanding of their pedagogical usefulness and instructional value.

2.3 The study was relatively short-term and included a limited number of research participants. More longitudinal research across larger and more diverse research samples would increase the generalizability of the findings and could inform us of the long-term impacts of translation-based tasks instruction. Future research may offer to investigate, among other things, comparative studies on the effectiveness of translation-based tasks to other ESP instructional methods, to investigate designs of translation activities regarding their timeliness



for selected populations of ESP learners, and to investigate the effectiveness of translation across levels of proficiency, or by cultural contexts.

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