

# PERSPECTIVES ON TRANSLATION IN THE EFL CLASSROOM IN PORTUGAL: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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**ABSTRACT:** Over the 20<sup>th</sup> century, translation was, in the most part, “outlawed” (Cook, 2010, p. xi) from most major English language teaching theories. Precedence was given to monolingual English classrooms rather than the use of L1 or translation to teach English as a foreign language (EFL). Now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is argued that EFL has undergone a ‘translation turn’ (Carreres and Noriega-Sánchez, 2021; Fehaima, 2022) and translation is returning as a teaching method. But has this changed attitudes to the use of translation in Portugal? This paper presents the findings of a short survey of university teacher trainers aimed at ascertaining their attitudes towards the use of translation in the EFL classroom, exploring how translation might be used and understanding whether translation has a place in classrooms of the future in Portugal. It is hoped this study will pave the way for future research into translation in EFL teaching.

**KEYWORDS:** Translation Turn; English as a Foreign Language; Translation; Teaching Methods; Foreign Language Classroom

## 1. Introduction

Translation has long been viewed as a foe or “pariah” of language teaching (Pennycook, 2008, p. 35) and for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was largely “outlawed” in most major English language teaching theories (Cook, 2010, p. xi). Precedence was given to monolingual English classrooms, rather than using students’ mother tongues as a way of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL). However, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it has been argued that EFL has undergone a ‘translation turn’ (Carreres and Noriega-Sánchez, 2021; Fehaima, 2022; Boukranaa and Sandy, 2024) and we are now seeing translation return as a teaching method to the EFL classroom. But has this ‘turn’ changed attitudes towards the use of translation in the classroom? What is the state of play in Portugal? This study seeks to explore teacher trainers’ attitudes towards the use of translation as a pedagogical tool in EFL classrooms in Portugal.

According to Carreres and Noriega-Sánchez (2021), the “translation turn” was in part due to questioning of the “monolingual principle in language pedagogy” (pp. 83–84), which for many years was the principal context in which English was taught. They also suggest that this ‘turn’ can be attributed to developments in audiovisual translation, the advent of the language learning platform Duolingo, which is based on translation and “crucially, the introduction of the notion of mediation in the CERF”<sup>1</sup> (Carreres and Noriega-Sánchez, 2021, pp. 83–84). Fehaima (2022) goes as far as to suggest that translation may indeed have become the fifth skill after reading, writing, listening and speaking and that it is a

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<sup>1</sup> Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), Available at: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/> (Accessed: 23 April 2025).

“valid method that helps learners consolidate difficult grammar issues” leading to them “improving their knowledge of English” (p. 542). This is echoed by Carreres & Noriega-Sánchez (2021) who suggest that translation is a “useful tool to enhance linguistic competence” (p. 83). In order to investigate this ‘translation turn’ in Portugal, a short questionnaire was administered among trainers of EFL teachers at Portuguese universities. The purpose of this questionnaire was to: 1) to gain an insight into whether there has been a ‘translation turn’ in EFL practices in Portugal; 2) ascertain whether translation now plays a role in EFL classrooms; and 3) to analyse opinions towards translation as a pedagogical tool among trainers of EFL teachers in Portuguese universities.

## **2. Background**

### **2.1 History of translation in the EFL classroom**

The first major teaching theory that involved the use of translation was the Grammar-translation (GT) method, developed in eighteenth century Prussia (Cook, 2010). Under this teaching method, students were more than often taught in their L1 (Pinho, 2020) and classes were always oriented towards a specific language; there were no classes with students with different L1s (Cook, 2010, p.9). Grammatical rules were memorised and then using exercises designed to focus on grammar and they were then translated into the target language (the students’ L1). Students were encouraged to focus uniquely on the structure and grammar of the phrases rather than the content. The emphasis was on the written word and the translation of “canonical texts” for assessment purposes (Pinho, 2020, p. 39), with the “ultimate aim of enabling its students to read the literary classics of the language they were learning” (Cook, 2010, p. 9). This method of teaching grammar was highly criticized and often viewed as the “villain” (Cook, 2010, p. 9) in EFL. Critics highlight the lack of focus on oral skills and fluency and that although students would become very familiar with the language rules, they would have a ‘lack of ability to use’ the language. GT has been referred to as “unnatural, authoritarian and dull” (Cook, 2010, p. 14).

In the late nineteenth century, the Reform Movement took hold in English language teaching. It emerged in juxtaposition to the strict rules of GT and emphasised the spoken language and phonetics, teaching grammar through context, rather than via the presentation of grammar rules. The subsequent Direct Method (DM), also known as the Berlitz method, was similarly a reaction against the draconian and authoritarian nature of the GT method. DM “neither used translation nor first-language explanation” (Cook, 2010, p. 7) and was grounded in four key concepts: monolingualism, naturalism, native-speakerism and absolutism. DM was perceived as “the one true path to success” (Cook, 2010, p. 9); the use of L1 in the classroom was avoided (Pinho, 2020, p. 40) and the L2 was to be used as much as possible. As argued by Pinho (2020), this had the effect of transforming the passive learner into an active participant in their learning process (Pinho, 2020, p. 41). Students were expected to think in their L2 and never to resort to translation.

Other methods that arose subsequently centred on the oral needs of learners. Two such examples are the Army Method (AM) and the Communicative Method (CM). AM

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reflected the needs of soldiers during the Second World War and focused on repetition and drilling (Pinho, 2020); its use continued into the 50s and 60s (Pinho, 2020). CM, in contrast, focused primarily on the communication between users of English, placing more emphasis on active communication competence rather than the formal learning of grammar (Cook, 2010). This method characterised many of the teaching of EFL qualifications at the start of the 2000s, such as the Certificate of English Teaching to Adults or Speakers of Other Languages (CELTA),<sup>2</sup> as it is now called. The principal characteristic of communicative classrooms was their monolingual nature; this was the norm in EFL classrooms throughout the 1980s and 1990s across Europe. Monolingual EFL teaching was “big business” and the huge amount of money circulating in the “promotion of an English-only methodology” was “commercially expedient” (Pennycook, 2008, p. 35). This meant that even if translation had been more in ‘favour’, it would not have made financial sense to include it as a teaching methodology. Translation continued to be actively excluded from EFL classrooms.

## **2.2 The return to translation**

The striking absence of translation from EFL methodologies, attributed principally to its negative association with the strict GT methods (Carreres and Noriega-Sánchez, 2021) and the money-making machine that sustained monolingual English language teaching in the 1980s and 1990s (Pennycook, 2008), has finally begun to garner attention among EFL scholars and linguists. In a 2007 article, Cook argued that there needed to be a change in attitudes towards the use of translation. Similarly, Pennycook pushed for the return to translation, as in his words, “the global enterprise of ELT ought to present the possibility of bringing millions of people into the global traffic of meaning” (Pennycook, 2008, p. 33), rather than focusing on monolingual contexts, particularly those in English.

It is important to note that while translation was absent from most ‘acceptable’ EFL pedagogical strategies and there was a general lack of interest in translation on the part of most second-language acquisition researchers (Carreres, 2014), the practice of using translation in EFL classrooms had continued over the last 100 years outside of central Europe. While “inner-circle literature”<sup>3</sup> (Cook, 2007, p. 397) rejected translation as a teaching strategy, in teaching manuals written and produced locally, it “stubbornly refused to die” (Cook, 2007, p. 397). In countries such as Algeria, China, Kazakhstan, Libya, Morocco, and Türkiye, not only did translation continue to be used as a teaching strategy, but studies were also conducted into the role it plays in EFL (Calis and Dikilitas, 2012;

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<sup>2</sup> Available at: <https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/teaching-english/teaching-qualifications/celta/> (Accessed: 10 April 2025).

<sup>3</sup> This is a reference to Kachru’s World Englishes model in which English is distributed in three circles, the Inner Circle, the Outer Circle and the Expanding Circle. The Inner Circle model refers to areas dominated by L1 speakers of English; the Outer Circle refers to countries in which English plays a role as an L2 and is used in governmental institutions. This group includes former English-speaking colonies. The Expanding Circle includes countries where English is taught as a foreign language (Kachru, 1985, pp. 12-13).

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Mohamed, 2014; Aktekin and Gliniecki, 2015; Huang, 2023; Boukranaa and Sandy, 2024; Smagul, 2024).

Where qualitative research has supported the reintroduction or return of translation in EFL in Europe, most studies were published more than seven years ago (Dagilienė, 2012; Kelly and Bruen, 2015; Marinac and Barić, 2018) and one of these studies related to languages other than English (Kelly and Bruen, 2015). While Anthony Pym did conduct a study into English language teaching and translation for the Directorate General of Translation (European Commission, Directorate General for Translation, 2013), Portugal was not included among the case reports. One of the most interesting findings of this report was that translation was found to “enhance the learning of an L2” and that teachers found that translation was “not a language-learning method in itself” but could be used as a scaffold or “combined with a number of general teaching approaches” (European Commission, 2013, p. 135). The report ends with guidelines for translation in language teaching; however, the report suggests that “more profound change [...] should come once teachers and learners begin to experiment with translation” (European Commission, 2013, p. 139). This makes my exploratory study even more relevant as it is hoped that it could lead to further qualitative research and the observation of translation activities in the classroom and to more up-to-date data on translation in EFL classrooms.

While some studies have explored the role of translation as a teaching methodology, the majority of them have been theoretical in nature, discussing the pros and cons of translation in language teaching (Cook, 2007; Pennycook, 2008; Koletnik, 2013; Carreres, 2014; Carreres and Noriega-Sánchez, 2021). In Portugal, the most notable example of the exploration of translation as a teaching method is a 2020 article advocating for the use of translation in English language teaching from a theoretical perspective (Pinho, 2020). It explored the different ELF strategies over history and positioned translation as a valid method, with a comprehensive examination of the pros and cons of its usage. In Brazil, studies have been conducted in a similar light (Tecchio and Bittencourt, 2011). Neither study provided any qualitative data on the use of translation in the classroom or surveyed attitudes towards translation. Notably, there has been, as far as I am aware, no research into the use of translation in an ELF classroom in Portugal.

There are signs that attitudes towards translation in EFL may be changing. The long held belief that translation in EFL is negatively associated with the GT method (Cook, 2010) may be waning, with some authors going as far as to suggest that translation may now be the ‘fifth language skill’ (Carreres, 2014; Fehaima, 2022) after the ‘classic’ reading, writing, listening and speaking skills. More recently, authors have posited that we are now experiencing a ‘translation turn’ in language teaching (Carreres and Noriega-Sánchez, 2021; Boukranaa and Sandy, 2024) and that “the huge success of translation-based digital platforms such as Duolingo, and crucially, the introduction of the notion of mediation in the Common European Framework for languages” (Carreres and Noriega-Sánchez, 2021, p. 84) may have led to translation once again being reconsidered as a viable teaching method.

### **2.3 Hypothesis**

The hypothesis that underpins this study is that opinions on the use of translation in the classroom are changing in Portugal and translation is now an accepted tool for EFL teaching. I posit that respondents with a background in non-professional or professional translation will be more open to the use of translation in an English-speaking classroom than those from a pure educational or language background.

To answer the research question and test my hypothesis, I surveyed higher education trainers of EFL teachers on the eight Portuguese university accredited courses in an attempt to gauge their opinions on the use of translation to teach EFL. This is innovative given that the majority of studies conducted focused on teachers (Kelly and Bruen, 2015; Marinac and Barić, 2018; Smagul, 2024) or students (Liao, 2006; Karimian and Talebinejad, 2013; Aktekin and Gliniecki, 2015) rather than teacher trainers. This paper reports the results of this survey, which as far as I am aware, is the first of its kind in Portugal.

### **3. Methodology**

The methodology for this study involved three main stages:

1. Selection of positive and negative statements regarding translation in EFL from the literature review on the use of translation in EFL teaching
2. Creation of a survey for EFL trainers regarding opinions on the use of translation in EFL, and the
3. Surveying of EFL trainers at Portuguese Universities (March 2025).

#### **3.1 Questionnaire**

The choice of a questionnaire over and above other methods of enquiry such as interviews or participant groups was based on this being an exploratory study with a view to conducting future research involving interviews or observational methods. It was limited to 11 questions, which I considered to be as “short as possible so as to avoid non-completion” (Saldanha and O’Brien, 2013, p. 154). Although questionnaires “consume less time than individual interviews” (Saldanha and O’Brien, 2013, p. 152), they do provide preliminary data, which although can sometime be incomplete, can be useful to ascertain whether future research should be conducted. In this case, although I was interested in the reasons that led to a trainers’ choice to include or exclude translation as a teaching method, I was at this stage only trying to gain an understanding as to whether it would be worth conducting future research into the use of translation in the classroom. I took particular care to ensure that jargon was “avoided, even in cases where the researcher expects that the participants would be familiar with, or even users of such jargon.” (Saldanha and O’Brien, 2013, p. 155) to rule out any issues of misunderstanding. This meant that terms such as ‘EFL’ were written out in full.

The questionnaire was organised in three sections: 1) six questions on the respondents' educational background/experience in EFL/Translation; 2) four questions on their training of EFL teachers and 3) one question on attitudes to translation in an EFL classroom. Before examining the issue of translation, I deliberately asked respondents about their attitudes towards the use of L1 in the classroom. It is important to note that the use of L1 and the use of translation in the classroom are not the same. While adopting translation in an EFL classroom involves the use of L1, the use of L1 does not automatically mean translation is being used (Smagul, 2024; Cook, 2010).

To create this questionnaire I drew upon Smagul 2024's study of 100 secondary school teachers of EFL, in which she used a five-point Likert scale to assess attitudes towards the use of L1 and translation in the classroom. Five-point Likert scales are not frequently used in Translation Studies, perhaps due to the fact that they can encourage respondents to choose responses in the middle that are neither positive or negative (Saldanha and O'Brien, 2013, p. 156). However, in the case of this survey, I really wanted to discover whether the trainers felt strongly about the use of translation or whether they were indifferent to it and a score in the middle might help me ascertain this. I had initially anticipated phrasing the same questions in "opposite ways" (Saldanha and O'Brien, 2013, p. 156) to ensure that respondents were answering as they intended. However, I was aware that the questionnaire needed to be short, as respondents do not often have time to answer (Langdridge, 2009). By the time I had drafted the first version it already had 19 statements, so to prevent it from becoming unmanageable I decided not to include opposite questions.

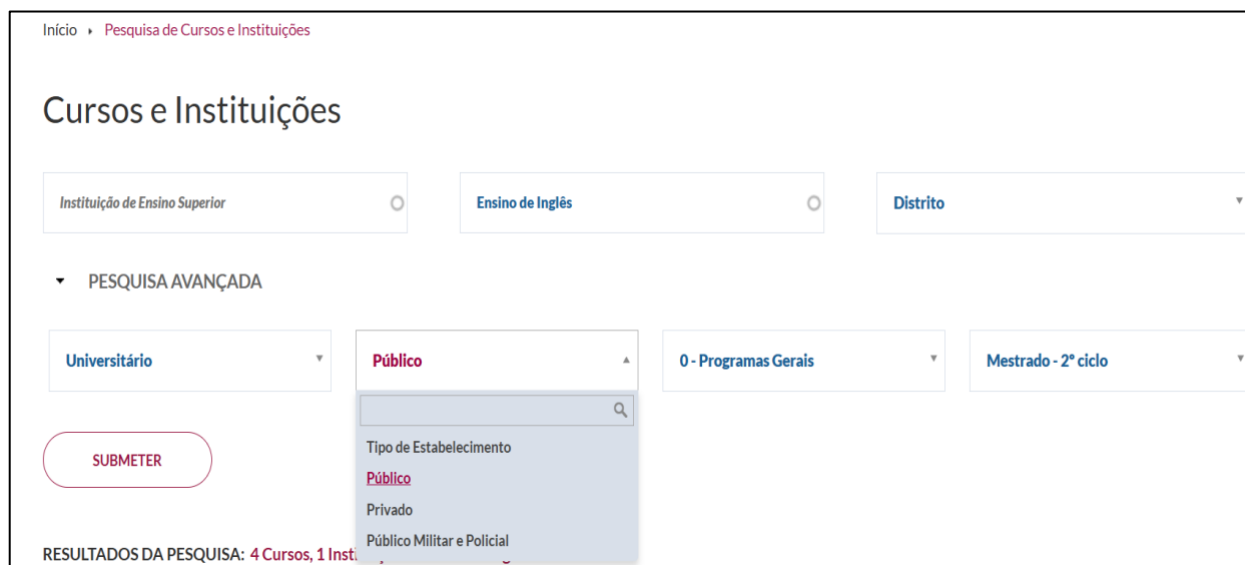
Smagul (2024) also consulted Calafato 2020's Multiteach questionnaire when formulating her study on L1 and translation used in Kazakhstani classrooms. I found this questionnaire particularly useful when considering how to phrase the questions related to my respondents' educational background. For the final question I chose a selection of statements drawn from the literature (See Table 1). These were based on a mixture of positive and negative statements related to the use of translation in EFL and how it can be used to help learners. Table 1 illustrates the list of statements and corresponding evidence in the literature.

**Table 1.** Positive and negative statements regarding translation in ELT gathered from the literature

<b>Statement</b>	<b>Literature</b>
Translation is a support to language learning	(Duff, 1994, Cook 2010)
Translation is detrimental to language learning	(Directorate General for Translation., 2013; Kelly and Bruen, 2015)
Translation fosters cross-cultural understanding	(Pinho 2020, Fois 2020)
Translation fosters mediation between languages	(Fois, 2020; Boukranaa and Sandy, 2024)
Translation exercises can be chosen to assist students with particular grammatical difficulties in English, such as prepositions, 'if' clauses or the passive tense.	Cook, 2010
Translation exercises can be chosen to assist students with particular lexical difficulties (e.g. false friends)	(Cook, 2010; Smagul, 2024)
Translation prevents fluency	(Cook, 2010; European Commission. Directorate General for Translation., 2013)
Using translation makes students think language is only understood if it is translated	(Koletnik, 2013)
Translation results in simplification	(Cook, 2010)
Translation encourages reliance on L1	(Koletnik, 2013)
Translation prevents development of skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening) in L2	(Koletnik, 2013)
Translation reduces student anxiety, especially at low levels	(Cook, 2010)
Translation encourages discussion about different possible answers and encourages group discussions	(Duff, 1994)
Translation results in transfer from L1	(Malmkjær and Windle, 2011; Smagul, 2024)
Translation encourages cultural mediation which is essential to language learning	(Boukranaa and Sandy, 2024)
Translation results in students learning isolated phrases or unauthentic discourse	(Cook, 2010)
Translation leads students to believe there is direct equivalence between languages	(Malmkjær and Windle, 2011)
Translation helps students work through grammatical difficulties in L1 and discover links between grammar and usage	(Kelly and Bruen, 2015)
Translation makes students more aware of language context and register by making comparisons with their L1.	(Duff, 1994; Marinac and Barić, 2018)

### 3.2 Inclusion criteria

To ascertain the opinions of EFL trainers at higher education establishments in Portugal, I initially ran a search for all the fully accredited Masters in teaching English as a foreign language in Portugal on the Directorate General for Education's website (Figure 1).



The screenshot shows the search interface on the DGES website. At the top, there is a breadcrumb trail: 'Início > Pesquisa de Cursos e Instituições'. Below this is the main heading 'Cursos e Instituições'. There are three search filters: 'Instituição de Ensino Superior' (set to 'Instituição de Ensino Superior'), 'Ensino de Inglês' (set to 'Ensino de Inglês'), and 'Distrito' (set to 'Distrito'). Below these is a section for 'PESQUISA AVANÇADA' with four filters: 'Universitário' (set to 'Universitário'), 'Tipo de Estabelecimento' (set to 'Público'), '0 - Programas Gerais' (set to '0 - Programas Gerais'), and 'Mestrado - 2º ciclo' (set to 'Mestrado - 2º ciclo'). A 'SUBMETER' button is visible. At the bottom left, it says 'RESULTADOS DA PESQUISA: 4 Cursos, 1 Insti...'. A dropdown menu for 'Tipo de Estabelecimento' is open, showing options: 'Público', 'Privado', and 'Público Militar e Policial'.

**Figure 1.** A print screen from the Portuguese Education Authority (DGES) website search tool for accredited English language teaching courses.<sup>4</sup>

This returned a universe of 13 courses across Portugal where students are trained to be English teachers (Figure 1) in the equivalent of the British secondary education system.<sup>5</sup> Of these 13, I excluded five universities, where either no 3<sup>rd</sup> cycle of the Portuguese education teacher training courses for English were taught or they were not a public university. As this was an exploratory study for future research, I decided to limit the inclusion of courses to those taught at Portugal's universities; I did not take into account the five polytechnic universities where masters in English language teaching are also taught. This resulted in a total of eight universities: University of Aveiro; University of Coimbra, University of Évora, University of Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro, University of Minho, University of Porto, University of the Azores and New University of Lisbon. I selected the contact details available on the individual university websites and asked for the questionnaire to be circulated among EFL teacher trainers for the 3<sup>rd</sup> cycle of the Portuguese education system.

<sup>4</sup> Available at: [https://www.dges.gov.pt/pt/pesquisa\\_cursos\\_instituicoes?plid=372&instituicao=&cursos=Ensino%20de%20Ingl%C3%AAs&distrito=3&tipo\\_ensino=1&tipo\\_estabelecimento=1&a=&area=&tipo\\_curso=9](https://www.dges.gov.pt/pt/pesquisa_cursos_instituicoes?plid=372&instituicao=&cursos=Ensino%20de%20Ingl%C3%AAs&distrito=3&tipo_ensino=1&tipo_estabelecimento=1&a=&area=&tipo_curso=9) (Accessed: 23 April 2025).

<sup>5</sup> Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/national-curriculum> (Accessed: 23 April 2025). This was chosen as I am most familiar with the British education system having followed it until the age of 18.

### **3.3 Language**

The language chosen for the questionnaire was English, because the level of Portuguese of the respondents was not known in advance, and as the questionnaire was about the teaching of English, it made sense to conduct it in English. In addition, by conducting the research in English it removes what call Saldanha and O'Brien call "another layer of interpretation of data" (Saldanha and O'Brien, 2013, p. 177), which occurs when respondents' data needs to be translated. Given that all respondents were expected to have a high level of English, it is not thought that answering in English would result in any imprecision or possibility of the respondents not feeling comfortable in responding in English (Saldanha and O'Brien, 2013).

### **3.4 Analysis**

The results of this study will be presented using descriptive statistics, including absolute frequencies, mean and standard deviation (SD). Mean and SD will be used for question 12 (Likert scale). These will help me determine the average answers on the Likert scale and also which answer was also the most popular in terms of level of agreement. Where comments are provided, I will examine them based on beliefs towards translation in EFL, using the statements outlined in Table 1 as a basis, to ascertain whether there are patterns in the answers provided by the respondents.

## **4. Results and discussion**

From the eight universities consulted, I received 13 responses, six of which were incomplete. These were, excluded, as respondents had only completed the first two questions. I analysed the seven remaining survey answers based on the responses to the different sections of the survey.

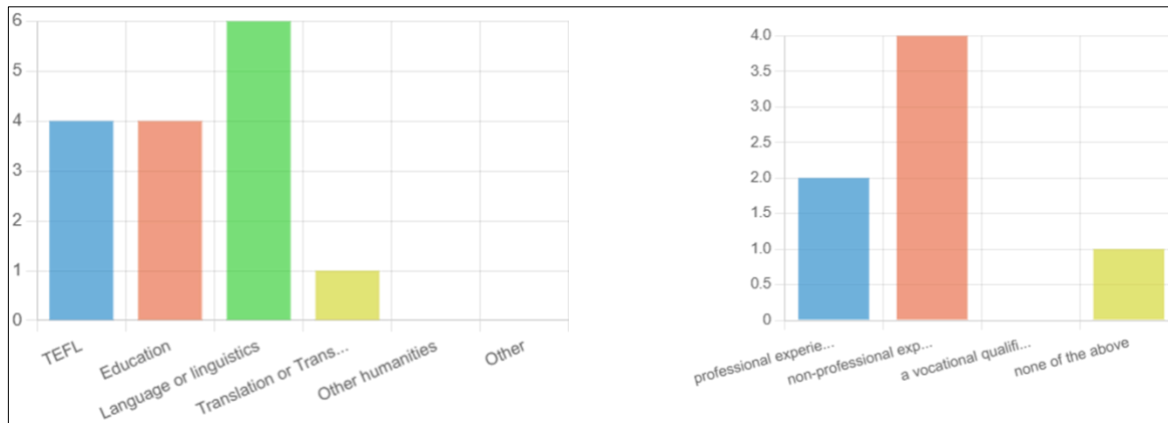
### **4.1 Profile**

All respondents reported their level of English to be C2; it is important here to note that proficiency in English is considered to be high in Portugal; data from the 2024 English First Report<sup>6</sup> reveal that among the 137 countries surveyed, Portugal was classified in the top 10, at position 8. Of the seven respondents, three stated English was their L2, two considered it their L1 and two selected 'other'. Figure 3 illustrates that the respondents were from the humanities; some held specific degrees in education and TEFL, while the majority had a background in linguistics or language; only one respondent had an academic degree in translation (Figure 3a). All respondents held doctorates. As the translation profession is in the most part unregulated, I wanted to understand whether respondents' attitudes might have been influenced if they had a background in non-professional or professional translation. The results show that all but one respondent had some type of experience in translation; four respondents reported having non-professional experience

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<sup>6</sup> Available at: <https://www.ef.com/epi/> (Accessed: 12 April 2025).

and two stated they had been involved in some type of professional translation in the past (Figure 3b). In terms of teaching experience, one respondent had more than 15 years of experience, four had between 0 and 10 years' experienced and one 10 and 15 years' experience. However, unlike the findings of the large-scale DGT report into translation and language learning, which found that the greater the number of years of experience of teaching, the more likely the teachers were to consider translation (European Commission. Directorate General for Translation., 2013, p. 41), the respondent with the most experience reported being unlikely to recommend translation to their trainees.



**Figure 3a.** Academic background of the respondents **Figure 3b** Experience in translation

#### 4.2 Teaching practices

In response to question 7 ('In which circumstances do you teach your trainees that L1 can be used in the classroom'), none of the respondents believed that L1 should never be used in the classroom. This is interesting as it would appear that the respondents no longer believed that English should be taught exclusively in a monolingual environment, which has been the dominant force in EFL for many years. However, one respondent did then state that they teach trainees to 'to minimise reliance on L1 to ensure maximum target-language exposure', which may suggest that use of L1 is still associated with issues of interference, as cited by one respondent in their answer to question 7. Alternatively, as argued by Smagul, it may reflect the "complexity of teachers' perspectives on incorporating learners' L1 and translation in EFL classrooms, as they [teachers] simultaneously recognise the value of translation skills while endorsing English-only instruction" (2024, p. 6). Six out of seven respondents stated that L1 could be used at lower levels 'among students who were still gaining basic competences' (Respondent 1), with L1 being use as a 'support' (Respondent 4), especially when the trainer wanted to convey information they 'know the sts [sic] wouldn't understand [in] the FL' (Respondent 4). No respondents reported that L1 use was a solution for long classes; in these cases they recommended 'more practical classes' (Respondent 2) or stated simply that 'lack of focus will not be solved by the use of L1' (Respondent 4). In response to whether L1 could be used for explanations, most respondents agreed that L1 could be used when the 'concepts are too complex' (Respondent 1), for grammar items (Respondent 5) or to 'facilitate

communication' (Respondent 4). L1 for translation purposes provided some interesting examples: Respondent 2, who has no background in either professional or non-professional translation, replied that translation was valid if it was a 'translation class', in deep contrast with Carreres' (2014) and Fehaima (2022)'s framing of translation as the 'fifth skill' in the foreign language teaching classroom. However, this concept of translation as only being valid in a translation classroom is not new and is reported by Koletnik (2013) as one of the common objections to EFL methods involving translation. In contrast, five of the respondents stated they would use translation to 'highlight linguistic differences and aid comprehension' (Respondent 1), 'sometimes to compare with L1' (Respondent 3), in 'vocabulary acquisition' (Respondent 4) and specifically 'in lower levels of English and for more abstract terms' (Respondent 5). Similar responses were encountered by Kelly and Bruen (2015) in their study conducted among 12 language lecturers in Ireland. Their study revealed that seven out of 12 respondents considered vocabulary learning was a reason for using translation and also where there are "gaps in learners' knowledge" (Kelly and Bruen, 2015, p. 157). In my study, other examples of possible reasons for the use of L1 in the classroom included: 'for discussions, as it promotes participation' (Respondent 5), 'whenever there is economy of class time [sic] or speech' (Respondent 7) or as Respondent 1 claims 'I advocate for the strategic use of L1 in the EFL classroom, particularly when it facilitates comprehension, supports learner autonomy, or enhances metacognitive awareness', but that over-reliance on L1 should be discouraged (Respondent 1). While other authors have found that teachers have "neutral" (Smagul, 2024, p. 6) opinions towards L1, the respondents in this study appear to acknowledge the value of L1, but that it must be restricted to the particular circumstances cited above. This reflects the findings of the Directorate General of Translation's 2013 report, which found that "translation can make an effective contribution under some circumstances" (European Commission, 2013, p. 37). Perhaps it also indicates that the concept of a monolingual English classroom still prevails among trainers of EFL teachers. This could, however, only be confirmed with a larger sample and also in a study involving trainers throughout Europe or the rest of the world.

#### **4.3 Attitudes to translation**

While the literature would suggest that translation has frequently been associated negatively with the GT method (Cook, 2007, 2010; Kelly and Bruen, 2015; Pinho, 2020; Smagul, 2024), the following word cloud (Fig. 3), which was generated based on the responses to question 8 (word associated with the use of translation in an English as an EFL classroom) (Figure 3), illustrates how, among the respondents, the most popular words ('beginners', 'comprehension', 'scaffolding', 'respect' and 'support') were positive in nature and linked to cases in which translation is used as tool to support students with the main purpose of achieving comprehension. To my surprise, there was no mention of the GT method or terms such as "unnatural, authoritarian and dull" (Cook, 2010, p.14) or comments related to the lack of "real" (p.14) or authentic use of language. The only two

potentially negative items were 'interference' and 'equivalence' both of which were cited by the same respondent. It is noteworthy that the use of translation is associated with words such as 'respect' and 'inclusiveness' and also terms such as 'migration' and 'translanguaging', all terms associated with the new multilingual context (Bennett, 2023).



**Figure 3.** Word cloud of associations with translation

Where respondents were asked directly if they thought translation were a valid method for language teaching (Question 9), four responded affirmatively. These respondents all had some type of background in translation, be it an academic qualification (Respondent 6) or professional or non-professional experience (Respondents 4, 5 and 7). Interestingly, it was the respondent with a PhD in Translation Studies who expressed some reservations that 'it should not be overused' in an English language classroom, while another believed it was vital for 'participation, effective learning and promoting social justice' (Respondent 5). This would suggest that some participants view the use of translation as a way of creating a more egalitarian classroom. Although I have not encountered examples of translation being used for social justice reasons in my own classroom perhaps due to teaching students who are mostly from Portugal (with the exception of a handful of Erasmus students) and of a similar socio and economic background, there is evidence of translanguaging techniques, in which students draw on their language repertoire and engage with each other in this way (Canagarajah, 2013). The three respondents who answered 'no' to question 9, stated that translation could be 'valuable [...] but not necessarily as a standalone method' (Respondent 1). This would appear to suggest that although they responded 'no', there is a slight contradiction in their response, as although they do not teach it as a valid method, they believe it could be helpful. One respondent raised the issue of terminology, suggesting that translation was a 'strategy' rather than a 'method', but that even so it should only be used under specific circumstances. This is echoed in the Directorate General for Translation report (European Commission, 2013) where translation is put forward as a scaffolding strategy but not a standalone method. The remaining respondent suggested that some students at lower levels 'might not have the language to translate from one language to another' (Respondent 3). They were categoric and stated that they advise trainees to 'avoid' the need to 'translate everything'

as it ‘encourages learners to be over reliant on translation. ‘If they believe the teacher will translate, they won't try to understand in English.’ (Respondent 3). Marinac and Barić’s similarly reported that, in their sample, translation was not necessarily viewed “appropriate for all levels of proficiency” (2018, p. 909) and that some teachers believed they should try to ‘avoid’ using their L1 in their teaching practice.

**Table 2.** Responses to the question: ‘in which circumstances do you teach your trainees that L1 can be used in the classroom?’

Context & register	Word order & reference	Time, tense, mood & aspect	Concepts & notion	Idioms	Listening skill	NEVER
No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
No	No	No	No	No	No	No

Table 2 illustrates the instances in which respondents believed that it was acceptable to use translation in the classroom. While the majority believed it was not acceptable to use translation for context and register, only two respondents believed it could be used for word order and reference and similarly for time, tense and mood. A larger number of respondents (four out of seven) believed that translation was useful for teaching concepts and notions and also for idioms. Only one respondent believed it was useful for listening; however, they also answered that translation should never be used in the classroom. It is important to note here that this may be a false positive, in the sense that the respondent may have made a mistake, given that they answered positively for all of the other categories in which translation could be used. While using translation to teach grammar was advocated by some respondents (four out of seven), the highest number of positive responses was for ‘concepts and notions’, following by ‘idioms’. In this context, respondents commented that idioms ‘are a bridge to cultural differences (or similarities)’ and that the ‘use of equivalent idioms is a way to understand both cultures’ (Respondent 2) and encourage ‘participation and respect for diversity’ (Respondent 5). Here the use of translation is advocated for mediation purposes. Mediation, in this context, encompasses three principal categories: mediating a text, mediating concepts and mediation communication, in which ‘translating a written text’ is listed under mediating a text (North and Piccardo, 2019). It is interesting to consider whether this signals a break with the past or whether this is indeed validation of translation as a method for teaching foreign languages across Europe.

The final question of the survey asked respondents to rate the extent of their agreement with the statements listed in Table 1. Table 2 shows the statements with the average response and the SD<sup>7</sup> in the mean. Overall, respondents were mostly in agreement

<sup>7</sup> Standard deviation (SD) represents the extent to which there are variations around the mean. A low SD means there is not much variation, whereas a higher SD would suggest there is a higher level of variation or extremes.

that translation is a support to language learning (mean 4, SD: 0.82). This is supported by the mean response to translation is detrimental to language learning standing at 1.57 with a SD of 0.79. This means that the majority felt translation could or should be used in some way in EFL teaching. Overall, the responses to the positive statements all fell between the 3 and 4 range, with the majority close to 4. This means that most respondents agreed that translation could be used in these circumstances, but at the same time, it was not a resounding 4 in full agreement. The most positive statement overall was 'Translation encourages cultural mediation which is essential to language learning' which achieved a 4 rating with a SD of 0.58, meaning there was very little deviation in the responses. This is particularly interesting given that above the status of mediation on the CEFR was discussed. This would suggest that translation in the EFL classroom is indeed viewed as mediation and in a positive light. However, in the case of 'Translation fosters mediation between languages', the mean was 4 (SD: 1.15), thus meaning that there were responses at the opposite ends of the spectrum. In this case, there was one respondent who responded with a 2 in disagreement with this statement. This would appear to suggest that the concept of translation as mediation in EFL needs to be explored further, perhaps in the context of interviews or focus groups.

With regard to the negative statements, the mean responses were all situated in the 2 (disagree range); however, when using mean for statistics, the outlying figures must also be taken into account. So for example, some responses to the negative data actually revealed more of a range in extent of agreement. For example, 'Using translation makes students think language is only understood if it is translated', although the mean is 2.86 which is between disagree and neither agree or disagree, it is important to note that 3 respondents agreed with this statement, while 3 disagreed and 1 neither agreed nor disagreed. This is worthy of note as it reveals that some teacher trainers still do have concerns about the use of translation in an EFL classroom. Similarly, in 'Translation encourages reliance on L1', although five respondents disagreed, 3 remained unsure.

**Table 3.** Statements listed in Table 1 with the mean and standard deviation statistical values

Statements	Mean	SD
Translation is a support to language learning	4	0.82
Translation is detrimental to language learning	1.57	0.79
Translation fosters cross-cultural understanding	3.71	0.49
Translation fosters mediation between languages	4	1.15
Translation exercises can be chosen to assist students with particular grammatical difficulties in English, such as prepositions, 'if' clauses or the passive tense.	3.71	0.49
Translation exercises can be chosen to assist students with particular lexical difficulties (e.g. false friends)	3.86	0.69
Translation prevents fluency	1.57	0.53
Using translation makes students think language is only understood if it is translated	2.86	1.21

Translation results in simplification	2	0.82
Translation encourages reliance on L1	2.57	0.98
Translation prevents development of skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening) in L2	2	0.82
Translation reduces student anxiety, especially at low levels	3.86	0.9
Translation encourages discussion about different possible answers and encourages group discussions	3.14	1.46
Translation results in transfer from L1	2.57	0.53
Translation encourages cultural mediation which is essential to language learning	4	0.58
Translation results in students learning isolated phrases or unauthentic discourse	2.29	0.95
Translation leads students to believe there is direct equivalence between languages	2.29	1.11
Translation helps students work through grammatical difficulties in L1 and discover links between grammar and usage	3.57	0.79
Translation makes students more aware of language context and register by making comparisons with their L1.	3.57	0.79

SD: Standard deviation

1= Strongly disagree

5= Strongly agreed

In the final section of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to leave general comments on the use of translation in EFL. Here, the overwhelming pattern was that respondents believed translation was ‘useful’ (Respondent 1) and ‘relevant’ (Respondent 5) and definitely not ‘harmful’ (Respondent 2) nor ‘should it be avoided at all costs’ (Respondent 4), but that it should be used in ‘particular circumstances’ (Respondent 5) and could be successful ‘when used selectively and purposefully’ (Respondent 1). However, it was overwhelmingly viewed as one of several teaching strategies that could be used in combination with others, but ‘not as a crutch that prevents immersion in the target language’ (Respondent 1).

## 5. Limitations

There are three principal limitations to this study. One is that the study sample is very small; however, as I am positioning and framing this paper as exploratory, I do not feel that this affects its overall validity. I hope that it will pave the way for future research into this field, including my own. Secondly, I did not provide definitions of terms such as L1, L2 and translation at the start of the questionnaire. Given that all the respondents were working in English language teaching, I assumed that providing definitions of these terms might have been viewed as somewhat condescending. Also, with regard to translation in the context of language teaching, I did not want to induce respondents into considering particular methods such as GT, due to the negative associations between it and translation.

In retrospect, I could perhaps have provided some simple and neutral definitions of L1, L2 and translation in the context of EFL. However, another option could have been to ask the trainers what they understood by translation, as Anthony Pym did in the Directorate General of Translation's report (European Commission, 2013, p. 36). This would have ensured that 'translation' was understood in its multitude of forms. Another aspect that could have made the statistics in Question 12 easier to understand, is that I could have chosen an even Likert scale, which would have prevented respondents from choosing '3' which is neither in agreement nor disagreement with the statements.

## **6. Conclusion**

Although this paper is only exploratory, it does raise some key issues that will require further reflection and research. Attitudes do appear to be changing, and translation is no longer "outlawed" (Cook, 2010), but I do not think in the case of the sampled population that we cannot argue that translation is a fully integrated and an accepted methodology in an EFL classroom. It would appear to be one of a multitude of 'strategies', 'tools' or 'methods' that might be employed by teachers. One respondent suggested that the 'current multilingual context of EFL classrooms makes it necessary to use inclusion and mediation strategies and using translation is one of these strategies' (Respondent 5). There was a slight correlation between respondents who had a background in professional or non-professional translation and them being more favourable to translation, but at the same time the respondent with a PhD in translation, was the one who had greater reservations about its use.

With regard to my own position, although my background is as a professional translator and more recently in Translation Studies, I completed my CELTA qualification in 2007 at a time when the monolingual English classroom dominated, in spite of some calls for change (Cook, 2007; Pennycook, 2008; Carreres, 2014; Carreres and Noriega-Sánchez, 2021). This means that my own teaching strategies have been influenced by the monolingual teaching paradigm. However, as I have discovered through translation and more recently in my own classroom, L1 use and translation can be positive for both the teacher and student alike.

As regards the future, I view this study as a stepping stone toward further research into the use of translation in the classroom. In the short-term future I plan on conducting a literature review of how translation can be incorporated into an EFL classroom. Based on this, I would like to run an observational study that will explore how students and teachers receive translation activities and their perceptions of their success for language learning/teaching. I hope that the results of the observational study will lead to the creation of manuals for the inclusion of translation in EFL teaching. In addition, it would be important to organise workshops with teachers of English as a foreign language to introduce them to techniques for using translation in the classroom. And as Pym argued 12 years ago in the Directorate General for Translation report into translation and

Bennett, P. M. - Perspectives on translation in the EFL classroom in Portugal: An exploratory study *Translation Matters*, 7(2), 2025, pp. 48-68, DOI: [https://doi.org/10.21747/21844585/tm7\\_2a3](https://doi.org/10.21747/21844585/tm7_2a3)

language learning, teachers and learners should “begin to experiment with translation” (European Commission, 2013, p. 140). I wholeheartedly agree.

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## QUESTIONNAIRE

### **Profile**

This section contains information about your educational and professional background.

1. Is English your...

L1

L2

Other?

2. How would you classify your English proficiency?

C1

C2

B1

B2

3. What is your educational background?

CELTA (or equivalent)

DELTA (or equivalent)

BA

MA

PhD

4. Were any of your academic degrees in the following subject fields?

TEFL

Education

Language or Linguistics

Translation or Translation Studies

Other humanities

Not applicable

5. Do you have...

any professional experience in translation?

non-professional experience in translation?

a vocational qualification in translation?

None of the above.

6. How long have you been training EFL teachers?

0-5 years

5-10 years

10-15 years

15+ years

**Your training of English language teachers**

7. In which circumstances do you teach your trainees that L1 can be used in the classroom?
- Never
  - For lower levels of EFL
  - During classes that are long, in which students may not be able to concentrate in English
  - Where students have previously used L1 in a classroom (past learning experiences)
  - For explanations
  - As a contrastive tool
  - For translation
  - Other

Please justify your answers.

8. Please list the first five words that you associate with the use translation in an English-as-a-foreign-language teaching classroom.
- 1.
  - 2.
  - 3.
  - 4.
  - 5.

9. Do you teach your trainees that translation is a valid method for teaching English as a foreign language?  
Yes/No.

10. In which of the following circumstances do you think it might be acceptable to use translation in the classroom?
- To teach context and register
  - To teach word order and reference
  - To teach time: tense, mood, aspect
  - To teach concepts and notions
  - To teach idioms
  - To improve reading skills
  - To improve listening skills
  - Translation should never be used in the classroom
  - Other (please state)

Please justify your answer.

11. On a scale of 1-5, to what extent do you agree with the following views on the use of translation in the classroom:
- Translation is a support to language learning
  - Translation is detrimental to language learning
  - Translation fosters cross-cultural understanding
  - Translation fosters mediation between languages
  - Translation exercises can be chosen to assist students with particular grammatical difficulties in English, such as prepositions, 'if' clauses or the passive tense.

Translation exercises can be chosen to assist students with particular lexical difficulties (e.g. false friends)  
Translation prevents fluency  
Using translation makes students think language is only understood if it is translated  
Translation results in simplification  
Translation encourages reliance on L1  
Translation prevents development of skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening) in L2  
Translation reduces student anxiety, especially at low levels  
Translation encourages discussion about different possible answers and encourages group discussions  
Translation results in transfer from L1  
Translation encourages cultural mediation which is essential to language learning  
Translation results in students learning isolated phrases or unauthentic discourse  
Translation leads students to believe there is direct equivalence between languages  
Translation helps students work through grammatical difficulties in L1 and discover links between grammar and usage  
Translation encourages the development of skills essential to language learning (accuracy, clarity, flexibility)  
Translation makes students more aware of language context and register by making comparisons with their L1.

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