



## *Impact of Word-by-word Translation on EFL Students' Written Productions*

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Abstract	Article info
<p><i>Word-by-word translation from L1 into English is one of the impediments that lead students to think in Arabic and make up utterances that make no sense in English. This study aims to explore the reasons underlying EFL students' use of word-by-word translation as well as its negative effect on their written productions in terms of meaning and language structure. Accordingly, this research has been carried out quantitatively and qualitatively by means of a questionnaire and a writing assignment. The findings showed that translation prevents EFL learners from using the English language appropriately.</i></p>	<p>Received 06 August 2023</p> <p>Accepted 13 September 2023</p>
	<p><b>Keyword:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Writing</li><li>✓ Word-by-word translation</li><li>✓ Written productions</li><li>✓ Mother tongue</li><li>✓ Mother tongue interference</li></ul>



## 1. Introduction

Since learners find the foreign language learning a difficult process, they tend to use their mother tongue and this later hinders the process of learning a foreign language especially when it comes to the writing skill which is considered as a skill of paramount importance. Therefore, the problem of interference may appear.

The writing skill is one of the major challenges faced by non-native speakers of English due to a variety reasons that may result from poor vocabulary, lack of mastery of grammatical rules and other aspects of the language, which in turns impacts their academic success.

Any difficulty in writing may lead to inappropriate use of vocabulary items, failure to express the intended meaning, mistakes in language mechanics, etc. Having one or more of these problems may prevent students from reaching high levels of performances in their written productions.

It could be seen, then, that the role that writing plays as a skill in students' learning process is of paramount importance. Therefore, the teacher needs to be aware of the challenges faced by his/her students while aiming to write in the target language

to be able to facilitate the process of writing, help them be aware of the kind of mistakes they make, and direct them towards improving their writing abilities.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 The Writing Skill

Writing is one of the skills along with speaking, reading and listening skills in EFL learning. It is a complex activity that needs correct grammar, appropriate word choice, clarity, cohesion and coherence. (Harmer, 2007).

In the same vein, Nunan (1989), stressed the idea that writing is a mental and intellectual exercise that needs the writer to generate ideas and thoughts and organize them into comprehensible language units.

Another view was held by (Wingersky, 1999, p. 4) claiming that writing is a way of communication in which a writer transmits his/her ideas and thoughts in a written form to readers. *"It is a process of thinking which the writer discovers, organizes, and communicates his or her thoughts to the reader"*.

Similarly, it was defined as *"conveying meaning by using words that have been chosen and put together in written or printed form"* (Farbrain & Whinch, 1996, p. 32).

Several studies have shown that teaching writing in EFL contexts is different from and more difficult than teaching writing in the mother tongue. (e.g. Lee, 2016; Manchón, 2009; Ortega, 2009)

In the same line of thoughts, research has indicated that two important criteria need to be taken into consideration when aiming to improve students' writing abilities including the development of problem solving skills and motivation among students. For instance, engaging students in tasks that raise problem solving skills help them generate their ideas to be active members in the learning process.

In this respect, Manchón (2014, p.105) asserted that that kind of writing assignments enhance "*consolidation or extension of knowledge*". Moreover, tasks that are based on raising motivation among students can be of great help in boosting students' interests and engagement in the stages of writing.

Therefore, it is necessary for instructors to become reflective of their practices and the techniques they implement to help their learners become proficient writers of the foreign language.

## 2.2 Mother Tongue Interference and Word-by-word Translation

The word Translation refers to the attempts to replace a statement in one language by its corresponding equivalent in other language. The view held by Catford (1974,p.20) refers to translation as "*the replacement of material in one language by its equivalent in another language*". In other words, translation may be defined as the transfer of words and expressions from the source language to the target one.

It is obviously seen that writing in a language other than the mother tongue is a complex task that depends chiefly on the writer's ability to convince the reader through the generation of clear and coherent ideas, accurate use of grammar rules, richness in vocabulary items, and appropriate functioning of sociolinguistic competence that helps to use language in a context that reflects the social and cultural background of its native speakers.

In other words, it is required that the writer possesses not only the knowledge of the field, but also knowledge of the sociocultural rules as well as other aspects involved in the writing process.

In fact, a considerable amount of empirical studies have been conducted to explore how EFL writers make use of word-by-

word translation while writing in the foreign language. These studies have been conducted on mother tongue interference, since it is one of the noticeable phenomena in the process of foreign language learning.

According to Wardhaugh (1970:50), interference is “*a tool used to account for or explain the errors which actually occur* “. Transfer errors occur when the student lacks knowledge of the target language rules. This leads him/her to use the rules of his/her native language.

Similarly, Dulay et al (1982:77) define interference as “*the automatic transfer, due to habit of the surface structure of the first language into the surface of the target language* “. This means that the learners recall their first language rules while they attempt to use the target language.

Ellis (1986) argues that language transfer leads to the use of L1 grammatical rules in the target language. Those rules of the first language are mastered by the EFL learner and interfere with the foreign language, giving birth to two kinds of interference: positive and negative.

Positive transfer occurs when the grammatical structures of both languages are similar, hence the structure of one language can be applied into the context of

the other. This kind of interference seems to facilitate the learning process for learners.

Negative Transfer, on the other hand, occurs when different units or structures of both languages interfere in foreign language learning. This type of transfer has a negative influence on the target language due to the fact that it leads learners to use the structures and rules of L1 in the target language, and this will in a way or another lead them to errors.

The question whether to use mother tongue or not in EFL contexts has been a debatable issue in recent studies. Opponents of the use of mother tongue considered it as a beneficial tool in learning a foreign language claiming that the use of mother tongue can facilitate the learning and teaching process of the target language.

In addition , it may be used in the classroom in order to make the meaning of the target language words clear. On the other hand, other scholars consider the use of mother tongue as one of the hindrances that inhibit the learning process and reduce the amount of input and the opportunity of practice.

Translation can be used as a tool to facilitate the learning process when teachers permit their students to use the

mother tongue in order to distinguish the similarities and differences between the mother tongue and the language they are learning. Moreover, translation can be used to clarify the meaning of new words. (Nation 2001)

However, there have always been contradictory views about the use of translation from L1 to TL in EFL contexts; for instance, some scholars claimed that L1 should be eliminated in the learning/teaching process, for it may make the learners think in their mother tongue.

Harmer (2007, pp.38-39) asserted that *"There should be an English environment in the room, when the English is heard and used as often as possible, and not spending time talking in the student's L1"*.

This helps students practice the target language in its context without referring back to the language system of the mother tongue.

### **2.3 Scholars Views on the Effect of Translation from L1 on Writing**

The difference between Arabic and English is due to their different origins; accordingly, EFL learners whose mother tongue is Arabic are expected to make mistakes when learning English.

Therefore, the huge difference between these two languages can cause negative transfer (Nunan, 2001).

Besides, the most common errors Arab learners make when they write in English are the inclusion of final [e], vowels, silent letters, and double consonants (Rohman, 2017).

Scott (1996) claims that the writing assignment becomes more difficult if the topic is culture-oriented and unfamiliar to the student, which, as a result, impedes the generation of ideas. Similar views indicated that EFL writers switch to L1 to generate and organize ideas (Wang & Wen, 2002) especially when dealing with challenging tasks (Woodall, 2002).

Woodall declared that the use of L1 by students in EFL contexts is dependent upon the learners' L2 proficiency level. In other words, students with low levels of proficiency in the target language may benefit from writing in the mother tongue and then translating what they have written into the target language.

Wang (2003) had also supported this view claiming that less proficient students switch to L1 while writing in English thinking that this will facilitate for them the process of writing. As clarified by Koehn (2010), EFL students can benefit from

recent techniques that allow automatic systems of translation. Yet, it should be noted that such systems could not reflect a human-like competency in terms of language production. Therefore, questions arise regarding how translation affects the language of EFL learners in terms of a variety of aspects. (Stapleton,2005).

While a considerable body of research agreed with this idea stating that L1 use at pre-writing stage is caused by the student' low level of language proficiency, and found that L1 use helps students to write better in terms of ideas, content, language, organization, vocabulary and mechanics, several studies had demonstrated that switching to L1 when writing in an EFL context will result in a written production with mistakes in form and structure.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Objectives of the Study**

The target of this study is to explore the effect of Word-by-word translation on EFL students' written productions, to examine the extent to which such strategy affects the writing process. In other words, the study seeks to determine whether translating words from the mother tongue in EFL writing fosters or impedes the students' writing abilities.

#### **3.2 Research Questions and Hypotheses**

The present research work is based upon the following research questions:

- ✓ To what extent do EFL students use word-by-word translation from their mother tongue in their writing assignment?
- ✓ What is the effect of using word-by-word translation on the written productions of EFL students?
- ✓ What are the reasons underlying students' use of word-by-word translation in the EFL writing process?

Based on the aforementioned research questions, the following research hypotheses have been formulated:

1. Most EFL students use word-by-word translation from their mother tongue in their writing assignments.
2. Word-by-word translation has a negative impact on the quality of the written productions of EFL students.
3. The lack of vocabulary and lack of practice might be some of the reasons that lead to word-by-word translation in the EFL writing process.

#### **3.3 Sampling**

To examine the situation under investigation, a random sampling technique was employed. Accordingly, fifty EFL students were selected from

Djillali Liabes University of Sidi-bel-Abbes. The sample was composed of students of different levels (10 from each level in the five years of their studies). This has an objective to know whether only beginners used word-by-word translation in writing due to their lack of practice or even master students who are supposed to reflect a good command of language.

### 3.4 Data Gathering Tools

While gathering data for this research work, both quantitative and qualitative means of data collection were of great importance to achieve the aforementioned research objectives.

The quantification of data was done through the use of a questionnaire that includes questions of different types for the sake of providing answers to the suggested research questions and testing the hypotheses.

The most relevant questions had been analysed in a numerical way to shed light on the issue related to the impact of word-by-word translation and mother tongue interference on the writing skill of EFL students.

The qualitative data have been amassed through a writing assignment. The selected participants were asked to write a composition in which they explain the significance of English as a global

language nowadays. Students were given one hour to write an essay in which they refer to the given topic.

The students' written papers had been collected, and analysed by the researcher to determine the lexical, grammatical and other types of errors that result from the generation of ideas from the mother tongue.

## 4.Results

### 4.1 Quantitative Data

Q1: How often do you attempt to use word-by-word translation from your mother tongue in writing assignments?

The aim of this question is to highlight and measure the extent to which students use word-by-word translation from L1 when being asked to write a written composition In English. Respondents were given 5 choices to rate the degree of the issue.

The answers to this question revealed that a total of 40% of the participants (first-year, second-year, third-year, and master EFL students) sometimes depend on word-by-word translation from the mother tongue while writing in the target language. As shown in the pie-chart below, a total of only 10% of the participants stated that they have never referred to word-by-word translation in their written productions. For more details, see the pie-chart below:

**Fig1.** Extent of the Use of Word-by-word Translation in Written Compositions



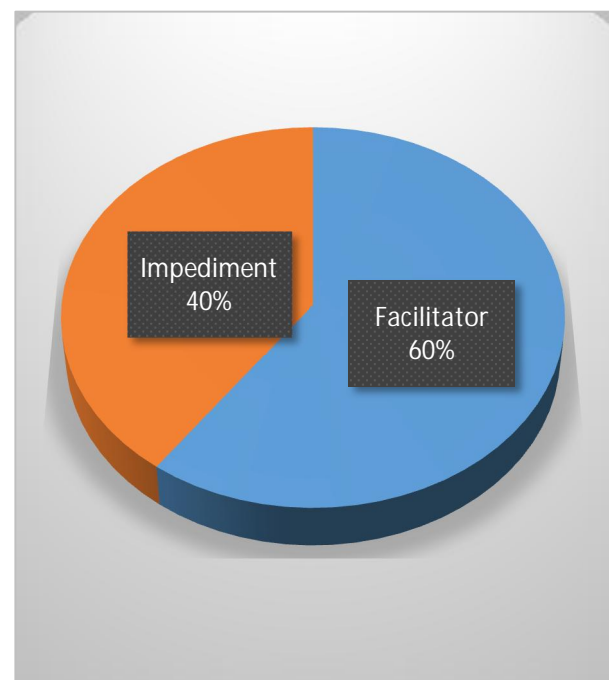
Q2: Do you think that word-by-word translation from the mother tongue facilitates or impedes the writing process?

This question has as a main objective to examine students' attitudes towards the use of translation from the mother tongue in the writing process. Informants were asked to see whether they believe that word-by-word translation facilitates or impedes the writing process.

As seen in the bar-graph below, most answers indicated that word-word-translation is a facilitator in the stages of

the writing process claiming that it facilitates for them the process of finding the suitable words and helps them construct coherent ideas. On the other hand, some participants perceived word-by-word translation as a negative strategy in the writing skill. For more clarification, see the pie-chart below:

**Fig2:** Respondents' Attitudes towards the Use of Word-by-word Translation in Writing



Q3: To what extent do you believe that word-by-word translation from L1 is positive or negative for you in the writing skill?

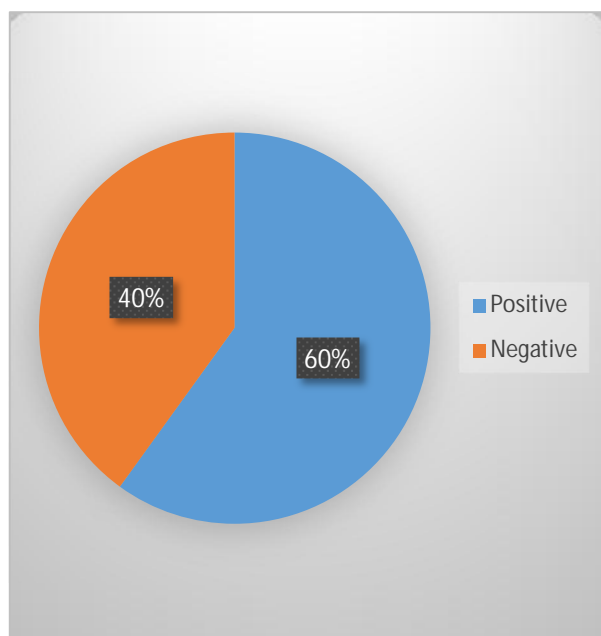
This question aims to measure the extent to which word-by-word translation from L1 is positive or negative for the selected group



of participants in their writing assignments. Respondents were asked to rate their answers by choosing either positive or negative.

As shown in the pie-chart below, responses indicated that word-by word translation is positive for a great number of students which represented (60%), whereas 40% represented respondents who claimed that this technique is negative and not at all helpful in the writing skill. See the following pie-chart:

**Fig3.** Students' Views on Whether Word-by-word Translation is Positive or Negative in Writing



Q4: What are the reasons that lead you to use word-by-word translation from the mother tongue in your written compositions?

The target of this multiple-choice question is to detect the reasons that lead EFL students to translate words from their L1 when being asked to produce a written composition in the target language.

Respondents were given a list of options consisting of four choices from which they can refer to the reason that leads them to translate in writing (lack of vocabulary in the target language, difficulties to develop coherent ideas, to facilitate the process of writing, deficiencies in the language rules, fear of making mistakes, no reason). For more numerical results, see the following table:

**Table1.** Reasons that Lead Students to Use Word-by-word Translation from L1 in their Written Compositions:

Reasons	Percentage
Lack of vocabulary	30%
Difficulties to develop coherent ideas	6%
To facilitate the process of writing	16%
Deficiencies in the language rules	20%
Fear of making mistakes	20%
No reason	8%

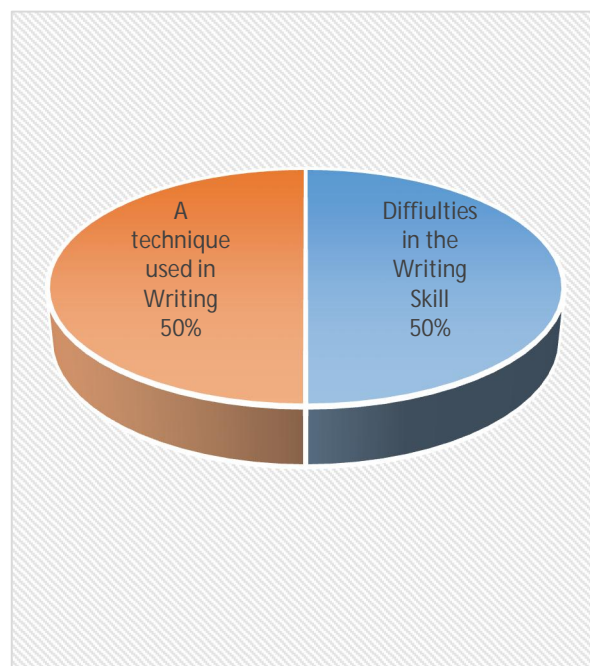
Q5: Do you think that learners' use of word-by-word translation from the mother tongue in writing is due to difficulties in the writing skill only or it is just one of their learning preferences?

This question aims to see whether students rely heavily on word-by-word translation in their written compositions due to the difficulties they face in the writing skill or they use it as a technique only to facilitate the assignment and gain time in the writing process.

Responses were divided equally between the two choices. In other words, 50% of the participants claimed that they extract words from the mother tongue and translate them into English because they face difficulties to find the suitable vocabulary items in the target language.

Moreover, the rest of participants (50%) claimed that they use it not because they face difficulties in writing, but because it is one the techniques that they frequently use in the process of learning and in the speaking skill also not only in the writing skill. See the following pie-chart:

**Fig4.** Students' Views on Whether Translation is Used Due to Difficulties in the Writing Skill



#### 4.2 Qualitative Data

As previously explained, students were asked to write an essay about the usefulness of the English language nowadays as a global language. Respondents were given the following question: write an essay in which you highlight some of the most important factors that contribute to the spread of English nowadays as a global language throughout the world. They were given one hour to finish the assignment.

The essays had been collected by the end of the session to be analysed by the researcher and to determine whether word-by-word translation has been used by the participants. Moreover, the purpose was also to determine what kind of mistakes do students make in

their essays due to translation and mother tongue interference.

It could be seen that most of the papers include errors in terms of different aspects of the language. Among the most common errors, one can cite:

✓ Word choice errors

e.g. “English in the time of globalisation” instead of “English in the era of globalisation”

“English is important today” instead of “English is important nowadays”

✓ Grammatical errors

e.g.: “English language useful” instead of “the English language is useful”

✓ Singular vs plural form errors

e.g.: “English is a mean of communication” instead of “English is a means of communication”

“people very excited to learn this global language” instead of “people are very excited to learn this global language”

✓ Word order errors

e.g.: “people learn English to find easily a job” instead of “people learn English to find a job easily”

“As a student university” instead of “As a university student”

✓ Punctuation errors

✓ e.g.: “people want to find opportunities therefore they learn English” instead of “people want to find opportunities. Therefore, they learn English”.

### 5. Interpretation of the Findings

Results of the data showed that EFL students are heavily affected by mother tongue interference especially in the writing skill. Indeed, it could be seen that this technique has a negative effect on the quality of their written productions as it leads them to mistakes in the language system as a whole in terms of grammatical rules of the language, vocabulary and other language aspects.

The results obtained showed that most students find difficulties in the writing skill. As a result, they attempt to translate words and expressions from the mother tongue into English thinking that this strategy will facilitate for them the process of writing.

Yet, studies had shown that translation prevents EFL learners from using the English language appropriately. Moreover, the findings regarding the reasons underlying this situation showed that

students use translation from the mother tongue thinking that it helps them to make difficult concepts easy, to feel comfortable, to think freely with no cultural barrier and not to make efforts to express their thoughts.

It is worth mentioning that the use of mother tongue has a noticeable influence on the foreign learning process, since the two languages English and Arabic are different and the influence can occur in all aspects of the language system. As a result, mother tongue interference is considered as a negative phenomenon which hinders the learning process.

For instance, errors occur when the learner translates meaning from his /her first language to the target language. Therefore, interlingual errors occur when there are differences between languages.

Based on the findings obtained from the quantitative data, it could be seen, then, that the three hypotheses were confirmed as follow:

1. Most EFL students use word-by-word translation from their mother tongue in their writing assignments.
2. Word-by-word translation has a negative impact on the quality of the written productions of EFL students.

3. The lack of vocabulary and lack of practice might be some of the reasons that lead to word-by-word translation in the EFL writing process.

It could be noticed that lexical errors are due to the effect of using direct translation methods. As a result, it is recommended for EFL teachers to be aware of the fact that students reflect different cultural background and different levels of language proficiency, and this has a great impact on students' educational performances.

Therefore, it is their duty to guide learners in their language learning process by attempting to maximize the amount of exposure to the target language in the classroom and pushing them to produce spoken or written language in English.

Moreover, teachers should design courses and materials in accordance with students' needs as to help avoid the effect of mother tongue interference that leads to word-by-word translation when learning.

## **6. Conclusion**

Indeed, one of the obstacles that hinder the process of learning English among EFL is mother tongue interference. The present study dealt with the impact of word-by-word-translation from the mother tongue

on EFL learners' written productions, and attempts to highlight the main reasons that lead to this issue.

Based on the obtained numerical results, it could be seen that some of the errors that EFL students make in the writing skill result from the effect of mother tongue interference.

The results also indicated that most students made errors in different aspects of the language system including the structure of sentences, vocabulary items and other related aspects.

The results also indicated that there are many internal and external factors that lead to the use of word-by-word translation in writing such as the learners' lack of practice of the target language, lack of vocabulary, and deficiencies in the language rules.

When two languages are similar, few mistakes will appear, which refers to positive transfer. However, when they are different, errors appear due to the interference between the linguistic rules and vocabulary of both of them. In that case, there will be the effect of negative transfer that leads EFL learners to use the structures that they are familiar with in their mother tongue and a high amount of errors is expected to occur

Thus, it is recommended to create a teaching atmosphere based on situations that give opportunities to learners to master the socio-cultural rules of the language to be able to write in an easy and comfortable way, and to avoid the effect of language transfer. In other words, the teacher as a facilitator can help his/her students to listen to native speakers of English and to enlarge students' background in terms of the foreign language culture in order to improve their language abilities.

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