

# Learners' Perceptions of Translation in English as the Medium of Instruction (EMI) at University Level

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## Abstract

Translation can be used as a learning strategy by students who learn their academic subjects through English as the Medium of Instruction (EMI). The purpose of this study is to investigate the perceptions of students towards the use of translation at university level courses offered in English at various departments. This qualitative research characterized as a case study consists of an interview developed to interpret how students relate translation to developing subject matter knowledge. The data were collected through written interviews with students of international relations, political science, international trade and marketing, and business administration. The data were analyzed using qualitative methods and suggest that most students turn to translation as a tool for both understanding the subject matter and learning new vocabulary; however, they were found to have limited knowledge of and even some misconceptions towards the potential uses of translation. The findings also provide implications for learning and researching through activities that involve translation, thus enabling learners to actively participate in the process of acquisition of content knowledge through active translation.

**Keywords:** Translation, Learners' perceptions, EMI, Tertiary education

## 1. Introduction

Throughout the history of higher education institutions, an international dimension is clearly evident (Altbach & Teichler, 2001). According to Altbach and Teichler, "universities started as truly international institutions" (2001, p.6). Knight divides internationalization into "at-home" and "abroad" (cross-border) categories (2004). At-home strategies include elements of curriculum, open-access education, domestic students, international students and scholars, extra-curricular activities, and research. Cross-border activities include the mobility of people, programs, providers, projects, and policy. In the case of this research, the use of English as a medium of instruction or EMI in Turkey falls into the first category because the program and all of its primary elements - instructors, classes, and administrative offices - are situated in the institution (Wallitsch, 2014, p.12).

In the EU's Bologna Declaration regional education integration led to a significant increase in the number of EMI programs. There seems to be a world-wide shift from English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to English as the Medium of Instruction (EMI) for academic subjects. While EFL has a clear objective of furthering language, EMI does not. Even though there is little research into the implications of education through EMI, it is a rapidly growing phenomenon (Coleman, 2006). EMI is defined as (Dearden, 2014, p.4):

"The use of the English language to teach academic subjects in countries or jurisdictions where the first language (L1) of the majority of the population is not English."

In a study known as EMI Oxford, Dearden et.al. (2014) conducted research into understanding the future trends of EMI worldwide. The main conclusions were that there is a rapid expansion of EMI provision and official government backing. However, they highlight that EMI provision is not supported by educational infrastructure such as the shortage of qualified teachers and the expected English language proficiency. Unaware of the consequences or outcomes of EMI, which is introduced top-down by policy makers and education managers, the aims of EMI are not understood well.

EMI Oxford report reveals that out of 55 countries the percentage of universities sanctioning or allowing EMI is 78.2 % at state universities and 90.9 at private universities (Dearden, 2014, p.9). In Turkey, all educational institutions from primary to university, from public to private are reported as allowing EMI. There are countries that are reported not to be allowing the spread of EMI. These are Israel, Iran, Senegal just to cite a few. From country to country EMI is promoted, rejected, refined and sometimes even reversed. Israel allows EMI instruction at the post-graduate level. Hungary and Indonesia have reversed the EMI education claiming that EMI was benefitting only a small number of learners, was costly and could lead to social inequalities. Another criticism is that English is reinforcing Anglo-American hegemony in the research community. Many of the students participating in EMI programs are not international students, but are domestic students who are required to study in English in the home country (Wallitsch, 2014, p.15-16). Therefore, there is a need for addressing perceptions of such students towards the use of alternative strategies such as developing translation skills when they take courses through EMI. In this study, we investigated EMI students' perceptions of translation as a strategy in English instruction in facilitating their understanding of academic subjects.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Context and participants

The research was carried out at a private university in the west of Turkey with students who had previously completed their preparatory education in English, followed by starting their academic subjects through EMI. We carried out written interviews with 40 students of such disciplines as international relations, political science, international trade and marketing, and business administration. They were participating in courses including Sociology, Introduction to Politics, Economics, Political Science, Statistics, Information Technologies, Organizational Behaviour, Math, Introduction to Management, and English.

### 2.2 Data Collection

We conducted written interviews based on open-ended questions about translation in EMI courses aimed at investigating:

- Their experience in EMI at university level
- Beliefs about translation
- Level of English needed by students to follow a course in EMI
- Indications of whether translation affects their academic subject learning
- Challenges encountered by students in translating in EMI for academic subjects
- Strategies used by students to overcome these challenges
- Perceptions of students about the competencies needed to translate

We conducted a questionnaire with open-ended questions in paper. We asked the course instructors to deliver the written interview. The voluntary students wrote their answers in a class hour led by their instructors. We made sure that they were reporting their true opinions on the questions being asked. We also provided the students with the liberty of answering any questions they wanted to comment on.

### 2.3 Data Analysis

The collected data were tabulated per question in the interview. We brought together all the responses to be able to read and code openly. Both researchers read the data and negotiated over the emerging themes, which were then compared to the concept of translation competence as illustrated in the discipline of Translation Studies and that of linguistics as it involves language learning abilities. This involved conducting content analysis through which the emerging themes were matched with those in the relevant literature.

We provide a literature discussion in this section rather than as a separate literature review in the beginning. This would enable us to provide the analysis of the data in a meaningful context and to relate to the analysis process. Research shows that translation competence is a multi-componential concept. One of the most seminal papers is the one put forward by PACTE research group. PACTE puts forward a holistic and dynamic model of translation competence. PACTE Research Group defines translation competence as follows (PACTE, 2000:100; PACTE, 2003:58; PACTE, 2011:33):

“Translation competence is defined as the underlying system of knowledge and skills needed to be able to translate.”

The model of translation competence is a multi-componential model and consists of some basic principles (PACTE, 2003:48):

- bilingual sub-competence
- extra-linguistic sub-competence
- knowledge about translation sub-competence
- instrumental sub-competence
- strategic sub-competence
- psycho-physiological components

In the model, the bilingual sub-competence is made up of pragmatic, socio-linguistic, textual and lexical-grammatical knowledge in each language. The extra-linguistic sub-competence is made up of encyclopaedic, thematic and bicultural knowledge. The knowledge about translation sub-competence is knowledge of the principles that guide translation (processes, methods and procedures, etc.) and the profession (types of translation briefs, users, etc.). The instrumental sub-competence is made up of knowledge related to the use of documentation sources and information technologies applied to translation. The strategic sub-competence is the most important, as it is responsible for solving problems and the efficiency of the process. It intervenes by planning the process in relation to the translation project, evaluating the process and partial results obtained, activating the different sub-competencies and compensating for deficiencies, identifying translation problems and applying procedures to solve them. The psycho-physiological components are cognitive and behavioural (memory, attention span, perseverance, critical mind, etc.) and psychomotor mechanisms (PACTE, 2005:610). Any bilingual has knowledge of two languages and may have extralinguistic knowledge, we consider that the sub-competencies specific to TC are the strategic, the instrumental and knowledge about translation (Albir,

2010:57; PACTE, 2011:34).

The findings from the written interviews with students of a diversity of disciplines were used to draw conclusions about learners' perceptions of translation in EMI at university level. They will contribute to our understanding of translation used by students in EMI and the underlying reasons why learners use it as a learning strategy. This will indicate if the infrastructure in EMI policy is effective and efficient from the perspective of learners' perceptions. It will also help us find out about how the land lies in terms of their perceptions of translation and the concept of translation competence.

The collected data were categorized into themes that reflected the content of written interviews under the linguistic sub-headings and the sub-competencies related to translation, which allowed for gaining insights into the extensive dimension of the status of translation in their learning through EMI.

#### 2.4 Trustworthiness

To ensure that the data analysis and interpretation is trustworthy or reliable, we negotiated over the emerging meaning from the data through systematic discussions with reference to the pre-set themes in the literature to be able to cross-compare existing knowledge with the ones that emerge. Although we tried to ensure data analysis triangulation through intercoding, we also need to discuss some limitations and issues to be considered for the reader. For example, students as well as directors or policy makers may consider a dual objective in EMI education, thus confusing EMI with EFL. Of all the academic subjects mentioned above, only English as a subject should be considered to be part of EFL or ESP (English for Specific Purposes). It helps students improve their level of English in a professional context. EMI simply describes the practice of teaching an academic subject through English which is not the first language of the majority population. This dual objective could hinder students' academic subject learning. The findings may not be generalised, but they can help us have an insight into the main issues in EMI and learners' perceptions of translation. The findings may also be influenced by some demographic and cultural factors encapsulating learners in Turkey. The participants, their families and other stakeholders may believe in staying competitive in the employment market and could see a study in EMI as a solution in that it may increase the chances of being employed in the future. There is more EMI in private universities as compared to state universities. They put this trend on the spotlight trying to attract more students, local or international, in a highly competitive education market and to create a better public image and reputation. English-medium instruction for internationalisation seems to be a convincing word for stakeholders (Wallitsch, 2014, p.8). Students with low scores in the university entrance exam often choose to study at these universities and their perceptions of their level of English needed to follow a course in English may cause them to compensate this shortage with translating texts into their first languages. This seems to be one of the major factors that may lead to changes in EMI policy. Therefore, the findings are worthy in that they may provide an indication of trends and issues relating to EMI.

### 3. The Findings

Having discussed the methodology of the study, we will now present the findings, which can be categorised under the sections below. Such categorization would enable us to present the phenomena from multiple perspectives and to discuss and interpret the results from various angles.

- Students' perceptions of translation
- Students' definitions of translation
- Challenges encountered by students in translation
- Strategies used by students to overcome these challenges
- Perceptions of students about the competencies needed to translate

#### 3.1 Students' Perceptions of Translation

Table 1. Students' Perceptions of Translation

	Translated responses	Frequency	Percentage
-	I translate because I can understand better.	23	67,64
-	There is a lot that I do not understand	5	14,7
-	My English is poor. It helps me improve my language skills.	3	8,88
-	It is easier to learn subject matters in Turkish.	2	5,88
-	Texts are too long and too hard to comprehend.	1	2,9

Out of 40 students, 8 reported that translation was practised in the courses offered in English. 34 of them reported that they did translation while studying on their own and 30 students said that they needed translation activities in class. The following descriptions provided by respondents illustrate that they need translation in order to better understand the subject matter due to the fact that they do not have a good command of English and the English preparatory education has not been effective enough for students to do well in the undergraduate study. In summary, translation is employed as a strategy to learn subject matter and improve

English.

### 3.2 Students' Definitions of Translation

Table 2. Students' Definitions of Translation

Translated responses	Frequency	Percentage
- Turning a text into the mother tongue.	3	16,6
- Turning a foreign language into a language we understand.	3	16,6
- A strategy to learn.	2	11,1
- Explaining what you do not understand in Turkish.	2	11,1
- Arriving at meaning.	2	11,1
- Summarising a text into the mother tongue.	1	5,5
- Turning a sentence from a language into another.	1	5,5
- Grasping unknown words.	1	5,5
- Rendering everything hard to understand into a language we understand.	1	5,5
- There is no need to translate when we speak a language well.	1	5,5
- Translating words contextually.	1	5,5

In the light of the responses in Table 2, how respondents define translation illustrates that they regard translation as a tool to learn. They focus on word level and sentence level and its directionality is from English into the mother tongue. This is also highlighted in terms of the challenges encountered while translating. 18 respondents defined translation as below.

### 3.3 Challenges Encountered by Students in Translation

Table 3. Challenges Encountered by Students in Translation

Translated responses	Frequency	Percentage	Linguistic Areas
- Unknown words	11	50	Semantic
- Abbreviations	1	4,54	Semantic
- Long sentences	3	13,63	Syntactic
- Words with multiple meanings	2	9,09	Semantic
- Grammar	2	9,09	Syntactic
- Area-related terminology	2	9,09	Semantic
- Structure	1	4,54	Syntactic

Respondents reported that long sentences and unknown words were the main challenges. The following descriptions provided by respondents illustrate that a low level of English proficiency plays a part in translation challenges. As is clear from the table, students report semantic and syntactic constraints that pose most challenges to their translation ability. These areas are key dimensions of lexicogramatical interface.

### 3.4 Strategies Used by Students to Overcome these Translation Challenges

Table 4. Strategies Used by Students to Overcome these Translation Challenges

Translated responses	Frequency	Percentage	Strategies
- Consulting a dictionary	6	31,57	Cognitive
- Doing more practice	3	15,78	Cognitive
- Doing research	2	10,52	Cognitive
- Improving language skills	2	10,52	Cognitive
- Understanding words from the context	1	5,26	Cognitive
- Reading books in English	1	5,26	Cognitive
- Memorising	1	5,26	Memory
- Consulting others	1	5,26	Social
- Consulting experts	1	5,26	Social
- Using translation software	1	5,26	Cognitive

A dictionary is seen as a source of information relating to lexis. However, knowing the meanings of individual words may not help them do a bottom-up analysis to get linguistic meaning though it might help them draw an overall meaning of texts. According to Oxford (1990), there are language learning strategies, which could be extended to the translation context. When categorized, the strategies reported by the students include cognitive, social and memory strategies. It is clear that the students apply cognitive strategies to promote their translation skills. What is missing from the responses is that they do not report that they use metacognitive strategies which involves arranging, planning and evaluation of a learning process. Another gap in the overall strategy use is the lack of compensation strategies which involves guessing intelligently and overcoming limitations

### 3.5 Perceptions of Students about the Competencies Needed to Translate

Table 5. Perceptions of Students about the Competencies Needed to Translate

Reported skills	Linguistic Areas	Translation Sub-competence
- Grammar	- Syntactical	- Bi-lingual
- Ability to understand a sentence	Syntactical	Bi-lingual
- Vocabulary	Lexical	Bi-lingual
- Speaking	Interactional	Bi-lingual
- Subject Matter	Knowledge	Extra-linguistic (Domain)
- Text production	Discourse	Extra-linguistic (Textual)
- Contextual meaning	Discourse	Bi-lingual
- Ability to understand a text	Discourse	Extra-linguistic (Textual)

Perceptions of the students are centered around syntactic and discursive dimensions which they see as important linguistic areas. This shows the complexity of sentence and discourse levels for students as they report they need to develop skills to deal with these two areas.

## 4 Discussion

It is clear that the model of translation competence proposed by PACTE research group that translation competence is a multi-componential model and is qualitatively different from bilingual competence (PACTE, 2003:48). Bilingual competence is one of the competencies that constitute translation competence. These sub-competencies are inter-related and hierarchic, with the strategic sub-competence occupying a dominant position. It is expert knowledge.

What most students of EMI courses do is very far from using translation strategies. They act in a source language-oriented way. They focus more on bilingual competence on domain competence. Being away from a holistic and target-oriented approach in translation, they feel certain that they need to focus on word- and sentence-level chunks in translating. Therefore, they are source-oriented and static. These are the skills that most bilingual people may demonstrate. However, translation is creative and dynamic. In order to translate, students will need to develop skills specific to translation competencies such as strategic and knowledge about translation. This shows that most students of EMI courses do not translate for the sake of translation, but they choose to turn to translation as a strategy to compensate for their low level of English, which should have improved at the preparatory education, but has not been done so. They tend to feel that they would understand their area of study better if they translated what they need to learn.

This will lead to lack of translation competence. There is a significant difference between a bi-lingual person and a translator. The findings are also in line with what Hönl states in that bilingualism leads to lack of translation competence rather than fosters it naturally (Hönl, 1992:69). He points out that translation competence is not acquired through translating texts and that there is a need to apply methodological knowledge for this purpose. We can infer from the findings that students focus on learning through translation for themselves and that the strategies that they choose to adopt lead them to bi-lingual competence in general, thus leaving aside the other sub-competencies needed to translate.

Turkish university teachers express concerns about EMI. In Turkey, university teachers are not convinced that the preparatory year adequately prepares students for EMI study. Preparatory year teachers are concerned that students arriving in the preparatory year with a low level of English, sometimes CEFR A2 level, were supposed to reach a B2 level in just eight months. They believe that EMI reduces a student's ability to understand concepts and leads to low levels of knowledge of the subject studied.

Understanding why most students of EMI departments use translation as a tool to learning their area of study more effectively will help us set working strategies. Unequipped with the competencies necessary to translate, EMI students are unconsciously faced with a vicious circle: whenever they attempt to translate in order to understand better, they will have to cope with frustration in ensuring success that they expect to attain. They will be using strategies that are bound to fail. There seems to be inconsistency between objectives set and methods employed. Since translation is a method that most EMI students turn to as a strategy to overcome their lack of competencies, we feel that it can be incorporated into the curriculum design to help them feel motivated, equipped with an insight into translation competence, and certain of the strategies they use.

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### **Biodata**

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