

The Role of Translation in Second Language Acquisition: Relevance and Practical Applications in the 21st Century

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Article information	
Abstract	Translation has continuously played an important role in second language acquisition (SLA) since ancient times. Historically, translation was the foundation of the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM). GTM supports explicit grammar instruction and vocabulary development. Through time language education has progressed with the focus changing to promote communicative skill and fluency; thus, the function of translation in SLA has been critically debated. However, though the application of translation in language learning is hotly criticized, translation is continuously used as an important tool for second language learning in the 21st century. This article explores the significance of translation in second language acquisition. It explores theoretical underpinnings, cognitive benefits, and cultural implications; looks into how translation cognitively engages learners and promotes critical thinking and metalinguistic awareness; and examines how learners acquire cultural competence through translation. These allow learners to understand linguistic nuances and contextual meanings. The article analyzes translation application in contemporary language teaching and discusses strategies including text analysis, collaborative translation initiatives, and technological integration. The article underlines the significance of translation as a learning tool in second language acquisition in the modern world.
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1. Introduction

Translation has played a significant role in language education through the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) in the 19th and 20th centuries. According to GTM, languages were taught using structured frameworks. The second language was acquired by learning grammar and lexicon (McLelland, 2019). Nonetheless, later the focus in language education shifted to communicative competence with the emergence of approaches such as communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based learning (TBL). Translation then was criticized for both depending on native language and undermining communicative skills. As a result, various

contemporary programs support the teaching methods that encourage learners to speak and think in the second language (Adil, 2020).

Though communicative approaches emerged and shifted the trend of language learning from GTM to communicative approaches, translation continues to be an important tool for language learning in the 21st century. The role of translation in second language acquisition is explored, and the benefits of integrating translation in second language classrooms are demonstrated in this article, as they can enhance grammatical understanding, cognitive skill, and cultural competence. The article describes the theoretical foundations and cognitive advantages of using translation in SLA. It presents practical teaching methods for integrating translation into modern language classrooms; these methods include text analysis, collaborative translation, and digital technologies, which can be advantageous for language learning.

2. Theoretical Foundations

This part presents the key theoretical aspects underpinning the role of translation in SLA and demonstrates historical shifts that change traditional practice to renewed academic interest. The discussion underlines primary cognitive principles explaining how translation supports language learning and explores the function of translation as a bridge to connect learners' native and second languages. These foundations build frameworks for understanding the translation's position in contemporary language education.

2.1 Historical Context of Translation in Language Education

The history of translation shows that translation has changed from the dominant language teaching method to a skeptical one. For decades, translation was used to teach a second language; the second language was comprehended by direct comparison with the first language (Amjad et al., 2021). With the advent of CLT in the late 20th century, the emphasis in language learning changed to fluency and practical communicative skills. Many argue that translation makes learners too dependent on the native language and disagree with using it for language learning, as it impedes naturalness and proficiency in the target language (Alshewiter & Al-Khataybeh, 2023; Rosi & Suharyadi, 2024). Despite these critiques, recent studies have reexamined the benefits of translation in pedagogy.

2.2 Cognitive Benefits of Translation

Recent studies highlight the benefits of translation in SLA. That is, translation usually requires learners to think critically, as they are required to solve the linguistic problems and the complexities of the two languages. This intellectual engagement fosters key critical thinking skills that promote deeper comprehension of the linguistic structures. This analytical process that learners face when translating enhances metalinguistic awareness and makes learners understand the language functions structurally and functionally (Khayatan & Biria, 2017). Through the selection of translation choices, learners develop heightened acknowledgement of nuances of meaning, register, and cultural connotations. Translation activities stimulate learners' curiosity and questioning; they encourage deeper language exploration and support autonomous learning strategies.

2.3 Translation as a Bridge between Languages

Translation improves learners' comprehension and memory of the second language; it serves as a bridge between the first and the second languages. Using translation to identify the parallels and contrasts between the two languages helps learners understand them more deeply. This function of translation is beneficial in early stages of second language acquisition, as it could be difficult for learners to understand new grammar without referring to the concepts of their first language (Baker, 2018). Translation helps learners internalize the linguistic features of the target language using contexts rather than memorization. Situational settings in translation improve learners' capacity for language modification. In addition, translation assignments require learners to consider audience, purpose, and tones, so they will develop the ability to adapt language to meet communication needs in the target language. These are the benefits of translation in SLA; it helps promote linguistic competence and metalinguistic awareness.

3. Relevance of Translation in Second Language Acquisition

Translation has gained attention as a language teaching tool, as it has been proved that it is not an act of simple language transfer but a cognitive activity. Translation contributes to deep processes such as critical thinking and meaning construction across languages. This part explores how translation serves as a tool for fostering cognitive engagement, cultural competence, and 21st-century skills, which in turn supports language development in second language acquisition.

3.1 Cognitive Engagement

Translation tasks are a tool to stimulate learners' higher-order cognitive processes; they require learners to analyze and compare the information between the language pair. These processes increase comprehension and linguistic competence. When translating, learners examine the complexities of the language pair; they navigate grammars, compare vocabulary, and transfer meaning (Bălănescu, 2023; Sheridan & Lynch, 2022). According to González-Davies (2017), translation activities urge learners to consider language usage and find the "what," "how," and "why" of language.

3.1.1 Analytical Skills Development

Translation promotes learners' understanding of how languages express meaning, as it requires learners to analyze grammatical structures and rules. These analytical requirements for conducting translation tasks help learners identify structures and differences and increase metalinguistic awareness. In translation, learners will face several translation options; they must evaluate contexts, connotations, and appropriateness to make the best decision. This evaluative process augments the decision-making abilities and enhances sophisticated understanding of language usage (González-Davies, 2017; Yuzlu & Dikilitas, 2021).

3.1.2 Problem-Solving Skills

Generally, when translating, learners face linguistic challenges that they are required to solve them. They may have to confront expressions that lack their counterparts or cultural equivalents in the target language. These challenges develop learners' problem-solving skills.

Through these procedures, learners will improve both linguistic proficiency and metalinguistic awareness that are crucial for dealing with communication issues in the real world. Translation will make learners realize that languages are dynamic and contextually sensitive; effective communication requires flexibility and analytical skills. As learners develop their understanding of the complexities of translation, they also build confidence in managing the sophistication of languages, which Sang (2022) refers to as linguistic nuances.

3.1.3 Enhanced Vocabulary Retention

When learners encounter new vocabulary in translation, the word is actively used in the context rather than memorizing definitions; this process enables learners to retain the terminology at several levels. Learners start from examining it, considering its register and context; this comprehensive interaction builds extensive vocabulary retention that enables learners to use it in diverse contexts (Benmoqadem & Koumachi, 2024).

3.1.4 Interconnectedness of Language Skills

Translation promotes the interrelation of all language skills, including reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Transferring meaning from one language to the other requires comprehensive understanding of linguistics, tones, registers, audiences, and all elements necessary for creating effective communication. Recognizing these connections, learners must develop an effective approach to language acquisition through translation. That is, learners need to be able to transfer linguistic and extralinguistic knowledge from the source language to the target language. Thus, to be able to translate requires interconnection of all language skills, and using translation in language will help learners develop it (Boguslavskaya, 2020).

3.2 Cultural Competence

Cultural competence has broadly been acknowledged as an essential element in SLA. Learning another language always means understanding its cultural contexts as well, as cultures are an important part in shaping a language. Translation is a crucial tool to cultivate this cultural ability. This competence enables learners to explore the complicated interplay between language and culture (Harding & Carbonell Cortés, 2021).

3.2.1 Understanding Cultural Nuances

Translation tasks require learners to engage in cultural nuances in languages. All languages have their own expressions and colloquial terms, which are closely connected to their cultures. For example, English has the phrase “small talk,” which is in Thai often explained rather than translated, as there is not a direct translation for this phrase. Another example is the Thai expression “เกรงใจ,” which reflects cultural values related to politeness, social harmony, and consideration for others. In English, this expression cannot be fully translated by a single word. These examples show challenges learners face during translation, for some expressions may not have their equivalents in another language. Baker (2018) asserts that effective translation requires profound understanding of the source and target languages. This means that using translation in teaching languages will help learners recognize not just the content but also the cultural contexts of the language pair.

3.2.2 Bridging Cultural Gaps

Translation promotes cross-cultural understanding as it serves as a bridge between languages and cultures. It has been shown in several recent studies that translation is significant in fostering cultural competence, for it enables learners to navigate cultural elements of the languages, such as literature and music (Jumharia & Rusni, 2018; Venuti, 2018). Venuti (2018) agrees that translating literature aids learners in comprehending the beliefs, values, and practices of other languages' cultures.

3.2.3 Developing Intercultural Communication Skills

The translation process involves exploring the differences of cultural norms and expectations. When doing translation, learners need to take cultural norms into consideration, which are mostly related to politeness and formality. With these differences considered, learners can develop the ability to modify the source language to align with the diverse cultural norms of the target language. This approach will overall improve communicative effectiveness (Byram, 2020; Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2021).

3.2.4 Fostering Empathy and Open-Mindedness

Translation creates empathy and open-mindedness in learners, as when they translate, they need to understand the cultural perspectives of the languages. In translation, learners are urged to critically analyze the relationship between the languages and their cultural attitudes. This process enables learners to engage in complicated acknowledgement concerning cultures, identities, and languages (Holliday, 2019).

3.2.5 Motivation and Engagement

As translation naturally broadens learners' cultural competence, integrating translation into language classrooms significantly enhances their sociolinguistic awareness. For example, when translating idiomatic expressions or cultural-specific concepts, learners are required to negotiate meaning; thereby deepening their understanding of the target culture. Translation activities engage learners with authentic materials. Thanks to the internet, which ensures up-to-date authentic, and natural target resources, the access helps foster internal and external motivation among learners. The activities can be assigned in groups, which will promote students' collaboration. Moreover, group translation can spark constructive discussion about cultures.

In conclusion, translation plays multiple roles in SLA; it helps develop not only linguistic but also cultural competence. Translation activities help learners comprehend cultural nuances (Baker, 2018; Kramsch, 2013). Translation serves to bridge gaps between cultures; it enables learners to develop cross-cultural awareness (Byram, 2020; Jumharia & Rusni, 2018; Venuti, 2018) and naturally enhances intercultural communication skills (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2021). Using translation in language classrooms builds empathy and open-mindedness, for translating requires the understanding of cultural aspects of languages, so it makes learners empathic and open-minded (Holliday, 2019). Recent research supports the importance of translation in promoting motivation and engagement in language instruction (Carreres & Noriega-Sánchez, 2011; González Davies, 2017; Leonardi, 2010). Collaborative

translation exercises broaden the benefit of integrating translation in language classrooms, and technology at present will provide learners access to multiple materials (Bowker, 2014; Ducar & Schocket, 2018; O'Brien, 2012).

3.3 Translation and 21st-Century Skills in Language Learning

The 21st-century skills that are essential for being successful in the present world include critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and creativity (Idrizi, 2023). Translation-integrated language classrooms can enhance these skills through translation activities (Byram, 2020). Much recent research has shown that translation exercises promote higher thinking skills (Chen, Tang, & Zhou, 2022; Ghaemi, 2023).

Translation inherently urges critical thinking, as this skill is a fundamental component of translation. Translators are required to identify bias and prejudice in the text; they also need to evaluate arguments, make distinctions between the languages, and choose the most proper words in the target language (Soleimani & Naghipoor, 2022). These activities naturally develop translators' critical thinking skills, particularly analytical and evaluative ones. During the translation process, learners do not only substitute words but also analyze the text deeply to distinguish underlying tones and cultural contexts. This process requires logical reasoning to resolve lexical ambiguities and provide appropriate judgment to retain the intention of the source text's author, while learners also need to adapt to target language norms. Accordingly, translation activities naturally develop learners to be critical thinkers, which aligns with a core 21st-century competency.

Collaborative learning skills can be acquired through translation projects, for these practices have the social constructivist nature that can help learners inherently acquire the language (Amini et al., 2022). Tambunan, Ramadhani, and Sibuea (2024) utilized project-based translation in language learning classrooms and found that it significantly helped improve many skills, including teamwork and critical thinking. They adopted a quasi-experimental one-group pretest-posttest design with 22 English Language Education students. The students participated in a "Collaborative Translation for Multilingual Online Publication" project, which involved team-based activities such as planning, researching cultural contexts, translating articles, peer reviews, and publication preparation. The researchers assessed the participants' development by using pre-tests and post-tests. The findings showed that after employing project-based translation activities, collaborative skills scores rose from 60 to 85 and critical thinking from 65 to 90. Abdusalimova and Shakirov (2024) also noted that when learners were assigned translation tasks in groups, they improved collaborative communication. Moreover, Turiman et al. (2023) revealed that online collaborative translation tasks fostered interaction between learners and strengthened their motivation in learning. They explored students' attitudes and perceptions toward online collaborative translation activities. The findings revealed that learners had positive attitudes about the activities. They realized that working collaboratively and jointly problem-solving while doing translation tasks yielded benefits in language learning.

Translation also enhances communicative skills in the 21st century. Benmoqadem and Koumachi (2025) used questionnaires to investigate 36 Moroccan EFL teachers' and 167 EFL

learners' perceptions of how translation facilitated their communicative skills. The participants indicated that they mentally translated before producing oral production in the target language. Translation permitted them to internalize structures and express ideas more effectively in the target language. The study results demonstrated that most learners had the process of preliminary mental translation of what they wanted to communicate orally in English. Therefore, translation is an inherent process of the students' language learning process.

In addition, translation tasks cultivate innovation and creativity. Sang's research (2022) demonstrated that learners improved the ability to find creative solutions for solving complicated linguistic problems through translation tasks. The benefits of translation activities to 21st-century skills are further supported by studies on academic literacy by Ya'u and Mohammed (2025). They found that learners can improve their metacognitive skills and ability to culturally appropriate texts across languages when they are trained to use AI tools ethically and critically in writing tasks. The results can be used in language classes, as writing correctly is part of translating.

Translation activities also contribute to the development of cross-cultural communication skills and cultural competence. Ting-Toomey and Chung (2021) state that to understand cultural norms deeply, learners are required to have effective cross-cultural communication. Translation activities naturally cultivate this. Yuzlu and Dikilitas (2021) conducted a quasi-experimental intervention using a translanguaging teaching strategy by employing translation and code-switching. The researchers allowed the participants to use bilingual materials. For example, when improving reading skills, the participants were permitted to use bilingual reading materials. This procedure gave them access to their background knowledge. They could explain difficult terms or contexts in Turkish (their first language) before they produced outputs in English (their second language). This process not only improved comprehension and enhanced the ability to negotiate meaning but also fostered overall communicative competence. In addition, though it was not said explicitly in the study, bilingual pedagogy enhanced cultural awareness, as it made learners connect to their first language's cultural references with the second language's content while they did translation and code-switching activities.

In conclusion, translation serves as another powerful and effective tool to develop 21st-century skills. Strategically designed tasks in language classrooms foster critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and creativity. The tasks also develop cultural competence and foster creative problem-solving skills in language learners. Translation tasks are authentic, engaging, and effective teaching tools in language classrooms. They help prepare learners to be successful in an increasingly multilingual and interconnected world.

4. Practical Applications of Translation in SLA

Translation-integrated language instruction can considerably improve learners' linguistic and cultural competence. This section demonstrates translation activities that can be used in language classrooms.

4.1 Culturally Oriented Translation Activities

Teachers can provide translation tasks involving cultures such as folklore, poetry, or literature in language classrooms. Teachers can assign students to translate idioms, proverbs, and expressions and ask them to explain how they relate to cultures. For example, teachers ask students to translate the proverb “ช้า ๆ ได้พร้าเล่มงาม” into English. Students are required to think of an equivalent expression like “slow and steady wins the race” while discussing cultural values, the similarities or the differences between the two proverbs, what makes them the same and different, any related cultural background, etc. In addition, teachers can assign students to translate everyday texts such as menus, labels, and street signs. For instance, teachers assign students to translate “ส้มตำ,” which engages students to make a decision if they should use “papaya salad,” provide transliteration, or include explanatory notes.

Collaborative translation is another activity that is very beneficial in language learning. For example, teachers can use translation workshops involving 3-4 students in a group. First, teachers assign them a task to translate news articles and short stories. Next, teachers instruct that each member has the responsibility for different paragraphs. Then, the group is asked to discuss challenges in translation, such as difficult phrases (e.g., “ตามมีตามเกิด,” “serendipity”), culturally related references (e.g., “prom,” “บุญคุณ”), and stylistic choices (e.g., “keep thinking vs “ponder,” “ถึงแก่กรรม vs เสียชีวิต”). Group discussions contribute to the development of creative and critical thinking and foster the ability to interpret cultural nuances (Baker, 2018)

4.2 Technology-Enhanced Translation Tasks

In modern settings, translation greatly benefits from advanced access to materials and global perspectives than ever available before. Technology grants easy access to authentic materials in all genres. Various digital tools enable specific applications, including (1) AI-assisted translation tools such as *ChatGPT*, *DeepL*, *Google Translate*, and *Claude*. Using them, learners can compare translation outputs from each tool. These tools significantly develop critical evaluation skills, as learners need to examine how each tool handles cultural words, expressions, register, and tones (Huang, Hew, & Fryer, 2021). (2) Post-editing tasks, where AI tools are used for translation and learners have to identify errors and improve naturalness. Teachers can teach students to work collaboratively with AI tools where learners serve as post editors (Yamada, 2019). (3) Corpus-based translation activities where learners use online bilingual corpora (*Linguee* or *Reverso Context*); (4) Subtitle translation projects where teachers ask students to translate short video clips (2-3 minutes) from *YouTube* or *TED Talks*; (5) Website localization activities where learners are asked to translate parts of websites; and (6) Computer-Assisted Translation (CAT tools) training where learners can use free platforms like *OmegaT* or *Wordfast* (Bowker, 2014).

There are various practical classroom activities that can be very beneficial in language classrooms. The following three activities illustrate how translation activities benefit from modern technologies. The first is the “AI Translation Challenge.” Here, students must translate texts by themselves before inputting them into 2-3 AI tools. They then compare the outputs to

create an improved, hybrid translation, concluding with a written reflection on when AI is advantageous versus when human judgment is essential. The second is “Translation Prompt Engineering.” This activity requires students to create effective prompts for AI tools, and students need to specify target audience, purpose, register, and cultural context. Students are to understand that AI tools are most effective when they are guided by human expertise. And the third is “Real-World Translation Challenges,” where real materials in daily life are used. These include travel brochures, product instructions, and posts from social media, to name a few. Students use AI tools for first drafts, then revise them with accuracy, cultural appropriateness, and target audience needs considered. This approach simulates contemporary professional translation scenarios while it develops critical thinking, technological literacy, and practical communication skills.

4.3 Text Analysis and Comparative Translation Activities

The following two activities require students to actively compare translations for their effectiveness. The first is the “parallel text analysis” technique. Teachers use literary texts or news articles from the source language and 2-3 versions of published translations in the learners’ native language. Students are required to analyze the translations comparatively and investigate how translators confront translation challenges such as wordplay, cultural references, metaphors, and stylistic features. The process will stimulate discussions on various topics, including grammatical constructions, vocabulary choices, and cultural references. It also improves reading and critical thinking skills (Cook, 2010). The second is “back-translation.” Students are required to translate texts from their native tongue to the target language; they then exchange translations with classmates. Thereafter, they translate them back into the native language without seeing the source text. When students compare the back-translation version with the original one, they will see where the meaning is lost, how ambiguity arises, or how cultural references are missed.

4.4 Collaborative Translation Projects

Collaborative translation projects help enhance communication skills and teamwork through three main pedagogical activities. First, the “Translation Relay” activity involves teachers dividing texts into sections, with each student or group responsible for translating a specific section. Afterwards, all students revise and edit the entire text to ensure coherence throughout. Second, the “Translation and Editing Pairs” activity involves students working in pairs, with one student translating and the other editing the text. Then, they switch the roles. Finally, “Community Translation Projects” activity engages the entire class in translating authentic materials required by communities such as pill instructions, museum labels, health information, and local business information (Kiraly, 2000; González Davies, 2017).

4.5 Translation as Assessment

In language classrooms, translation assignments serve as effective evaluation tools. Various activities are tasks that teachers can use in language learning classes. For instance, “Sight Translation” exercises require students to translate texts orally within a limited timeframe. Another activity is the “Translation Commentary” task, which requires students to submit both their translation and written explanation of the translation to see how they justify

their choices of translation. Furthermore, teachers can employ the “Error Analysis Task,” where teachers present translations and students need to identify and correct errors. Lastly, “Portfolio Assessment” requires students to collect their translation work throughout the term to reflect the progress and challenges (Carreres & Noriega-Sánchez, 2011).

4.6 Challenges and Practical Solutions

Despite the clear advantages that translation activities bring, there are some drawbacks. An obvious drawback is that translation could become a crutch that leads learners to overrely on their native language. To address this issue, teachers should implement the approach in a balanced manner, as there are many techniques available. First, the “Communicative Sandwich” technique, in which translation tasks are used, but they will be followed by communicative activities. Second, “Timed Native Language Use” refers to the limited use of the first language in classrooms. In other words, teachers specify which tasks students are to use their native language for and which ones they are not. Third, “Translation Plus Tasks”: this activity requires students to do more than translation. For example, they are asked to translate the text and then perform it. And fourth, “Progressive Independence,” where the translation use is gradually declined as their target language proficiency improves. Initially, translation serves as a scaffold to facilitate comprehension. After that it is phased out to foster target language production and mitigate interlingual interference. (Cook, 2010; Leonardi, 2010).

In addition, there are diverse students in classrooms; teachers can personalize translation exercises to meet students’ needs. The following are differentiated strategies. First, “Tiered Translation Tasks,” require students to work on the same topics, but the texts differ in complexity. Second, “Choice Boards” offer multiple options for translation tasks at varying levels of difficulty. Third, “Scaffolded Support” provides word banks, sentence frames, or cultural reference materials to assist students who need them. Fourth, “Peer Mentoring” involves pairing stronger students with those who need support (González Davies, 2017; Laviosa, 2014).

When these practical applications are implemented strategically and potential challenges are dealt with proactively, translation can serve as a powerful and effective teaching tool to improve linguistic and cultural competence, as well as critical thinking ability, which is essential for effective communication in a multilingual world.

5. Conclusion

Translation is an effective and beneficial teaching tool in second language acquisition (SLA). It fosters learners’ cognitive and cultural competence as well as motivational advantages. Incorporating translation into contemporary teaching methods can significantly develop students’ linguistic skills and cultural awareness. Translation promotes the comparison of linguistic structures between the native and the target language, so it stimulates learners’ analytical thinking and problem-solving skills. Studies demonstrate that when learners translate, they exercise cognitive exertion, and such activity can enhance language retention and understanding (Baker, 2018). Translation-incorporated activities in language classrooms help teachers develop learners’ comprehension of both languages and foster cognitive skills that are important for effective communication in the globalized world.

Translation also fosters cultural comprehension, as texts can be incorporated with idioms, expressions, and cultural references. Moreover, the contexts that learners encounter when translating enable them to understand the target language's sociolinguistic aspects. Learners who are exposed to other cultures will be open-minded and understanding. They will develop empathy and intercultural communication skills, which are significant in the interconnected world at present. Translation-integrated teaching methods help learners explore the relationship between languages and cultures, and this builds the ability to cope with intricate social interactions and increases communicative competence. Collaborative translation activities also create a sense of community and shared purpose, which augment students' motivation and commitment to learning languages.

Translation-integrated activities in second language classrooms significantly help students gain the skills they need for communicating successfully in different situations. Acknowledging translation as an effective teaching instrument in SLA contributes to more successful language learning. With translation integration, language teaching will stimulate critical thinking skills, cognitive growth, and cultural competence. Furthermore, students will be motivated through translation, as they investigate the differences between languages; this leads to vibrant learning environments. Consequently, incorporating translation in language learning classrooms builds both linguistic and cultural skills while equipping learners to have intelligent and respectful interaction with the interconnected world.

6. About the Author

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7. Declaration of AI Use

The author declares that the article was entirely written by the author and did not use any AI tools to rephrase the sentences that had been produced by the author. The only tool used in this article was *QuillBot*, which was used only for identifying misspellings and grammar errors. The author takes full responsibility for the content.

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