

# **The Use of Translation in English Teaching**

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**Abstract:**

In this qualitative study, I aim to investigate the use of translation as an educational tool in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in the context of middle schools, so to kids aged from 10 to 14 at lower-intermediate level of English. Translation has been perceived, according to the time, as a beneficial bridge that allows the language learners to cross into the world of a new foreign language or as an undesirable barrier that prevents the students from immersing in the target language and soaking up knowledge. In this paper I interviewed five middle school teachers in order to find out what their views on translation as an educational tool were. The main points of my research were how much and for what they used translation when teaching English, what were their thoughts on online translation tools such as online bilingual dictionaries and Google Translate, and if they allowed their students to use them, and lastly if they believed their students would be able to learn English without using translation at all. After analysing the data I collected from the answers, I found that translation is mostly used in class to draw comparisons for grammatical structures, as a shortcut when learning new vocabulary or to cement keywords, and to explain idiomatic expressions. On the topic of online translation tools, more than half of my interviewees were in favour of online bilingual dictionaries, but all of them rejected the use of whole text translator like Google Translate. Finally, when asked if English in middle schools could be taught without using translation, the general consensus was that it would be unrealistic.

## **I. Introduction**

### *1.1 View of translation through the different teaching methods*

Throughout the years and generations, translation as an educational tool has been seen under a positive or negative light depending on the time. From the mid-19th century all the way to World War II, it was considered the ultimate language teaching tool. In fact, as explained by Rahman (2012), at the time, the Grammar-Translation Method taught to learn through text analysis in what we could consider an intense and intensive deductive method of learning, coupled with translation of disjointed sentences from the target language. The problem with this method, as one can easily discern, is that it paid little to no attention to the speaking and listening part of learning the language. This lack brought forth the need to completely change the teaching method, leading to what is referred to as the “Direct Method”, in which the native language of the learners, and translation as a consequence, were completely rejected and forbidden (Navidinia, Akar & Hendevalan, 2019). As Liao (2002: p. 21) illustrates in his study, the Direct Method “advocated exclusive use of the target language, employment of everyday vocabulary words and sentences, teaching of oral communication skills, and teaching of vocabulary and grammar through explanations in the L2”. However, even this method proved counterproductive as it was too time-consuming and inefficient. The native language, and translations, were therefore reintroduced in language teaching in the 1970s, when two new methods were introduced: “Community Language Learning” and “Suggestopedia” (Liao, 2002: p. 22-23). In both of these, translation played an important role as a safety net and comfort blanket so that the students could feel more secure in their understanding, which lead to more productive learning. As Liao (2002: p. 22-23) explains, in “Community Language Learning” the teachers “continually translated what the learners wanted to say back to them in the target language, and the learners repeated”, whereas “Suggestopedia” was based on the translation and repetition of dialogues as exercise. At the same time, another strand of language learning methods appeared going in the opposite direction, which is to say methods that still negated the use of

translation even after the flaws of the “Direct Method” became apparent. These methods were “The Silent Way”, “The Natural Approach”, and “Total Physical Response” (Liao, 2002: p.23-24). It was from this branch of methods that the notion of “thinking in the target language as much as possible” was born and started to spread, eventually giving birth to “Communicative Language Teaching”, which is nowadays still the most widely used method. This method uses activities such as role-play, games, and problem-solving exercises to encourage the students to use the language in class, engaging in conversation with one another. The core belief of the Communicative Language Teaching approach, as explained by Husain (1995), quoted in Al-Musawi (2014: p.2), is that “the best way for the learner to gain aptitude in the target language is to think, particularly, in that language, an act that can increase proficiency in the target language”. To that end, translation was considered obstructive. Nevertheless, in recent years, scholars have started to advocate for the reintroduction of translation and the use of native languages in EFL teaching, deeming them useful once again. Husain (1994), as quoted in Liao (2002: p.26) summarized the principles and boundaries of this reintroduction so that we do not revert back to something akin to the Grammar Translation Method but see translation more as a tool in the “broader framework of CTL” (p. 26). The chief notions are exposing students to the L2 as much as possible while utilizing the L1 judiciously; moreover, he mentioned the introduction of translation activities on up-to-date, contemporary materials that teachers could use as a mean to point out the difference between L1 and L2 language items such as grammar structures and vocabulary terms.

### *1.2 Advantages and disadvantages of using translation as a teaching tool.*

Scholars have compared translation to a lot of things: from a barrier to a bridge between the known and the unknown, from an undesirable supporting pillar (Al-Musawi, 2014), to a crutch, to a filter used to read the new and strange “map” of experiences that is a foreign language (Dagut, 1986: p. 204). All metaphors are correct, but also limited, as in the end they highlight only one of the many aspects that translation brings to the metaphorical learning table.

The main advantage of translation as a tool of English teaching is, without a doubt, the possibility to draw easy and immediate comparisons between L1 and L2, which facilitates the understanding of vocabulary, as a matter of course, and even complex grammatical structures. Moreover, as Károly (2014) pointed out in his study, translation activities often help the students become more aware of the contexts in which they can use certain terms, and which grammatical register is appropriate to each context.

On the other hand, the main disadvantages to using translation as a teaching tool, as listed in Liao (2002), could be said to be the tendency to trust in word-to-word equivalents, the production of language interference, which could lead to create awkward and unnatural sentences in the target language, and the constant presence of a “crutch” (Liao, 2002: p.41, p.101) on which student could become over reliant. Nevertheless, if we look at those disadvantages on a different perspective, they the crutch could become a safety blanket instead, the language interference could give students examples to avoid, and the literal translations could be moulded depending on the context. In the end, just like its metaphors, advantages and disadvantages are just two faces of the same coin that is translation. And as with any tool, its usefulness and harmfulness depend on the use one makes of it.

### *1.3 Use of online translation tools*

As technology advances and the new generation of students become more and more “digital”, it stands to reason that everything else should adapt to the changes of time, including the tools used in language learning. As Lidström (2019) very eloquently states in her thesis: “the day of the paper dictionary has gone, and this is being followed closely by online dictionaries and thesauruses” (p. 2). In the field of translation, such tools have long been implemented, but, as in most cases, the education system still lags behind, be it a matter of lack of funds or stubbornness on keeping to traditions. Whatever the reason, in middle school digital tools are not always available in classes and hardly ever in exam settings. Classrooms are not equipped with computers, except for the one linked to the Interactive board, for the schools that have it. Moreover, even if

students do have access to the Internet, and to online translation tools as a consequence, they are often forbidden from using their tablets or phones even for such a purpose. From my perspective, as a language student, as a translator, but also as a teacher, I do not understand such an aversion to online translation tools and believe students and teachers both would benefit greatly from learning how to use such tools properly.

### *1.3.1 Italian-English dictionaries online: Word Reference, Reverso Context*

Online dictionaries are numerous and most of them are well-made and user-friendly, however, different dictionaries may target different levels of learners. In order to explain how these dictionaries differ, I conducted a little experiment, which is to say, I tried typing the word “research”, first in English, then in Italian, in the two most popular online dictionaries and see how they differed in their answers. The first dictionary I used was Reverso Context; when inputting the word “ricerca” it gives 25 possible English translations and 10 suggestions of words that could be added to the term search. Whereas for the word “research” it shows 12 possible Italian translations, divided in nouns, verbs, and adjectives by colour. Reverso then gives a series of sentences extracted from real written works, together with their translation, in which the word is used in different contexts. If the user clicks on one of the possible translation words, the sentences shown focus on that meaning only, and translations and synonyms in Italian are shown under the word, so to narrow down its nuance of meaning. The second dictionary I experimented with was Word Reference, which, both for “ricerca” and “research”, shows the 2 most commonly used translations and their contexts, plus one additional less common translation, all with one example sentence, and its translation, each. It then shows a list of around 30 “compound forms” of the input term and their correspondents in the target language. Overall, Reverso Context gives more translation options, and its example sentences are far more numerous, however, that does not mean that all learners consider it better than Word Reference. In fact, while from a high-level English learner or even a translator’s perspective having all possible translations of a word at their disposal may be advantageous, to a beginner or

low-level learner it may result confusing and overwhelming. Not to mention it can more easily lead to making mistakes. Which is why teachers often recommend Word Reference as a better option, especially in middle school were the level is still low.

### *1.3.1 Text translation tools online: Google Translate*

Whole text translation tools, or even CAT tools, are usually not very used by English learners who do not specialize in translation as they are often not free and too complicated to use for middle schoolers. That is, with the exception of Google Translate (GT). However, GT's reputation among teachers in schools is not, and never has been, positive. One of the reasons for that, as explained by Aksnes (2018), is that languages are complex systems, and to be able to translate between these systems one needs a comprehensive understanding of both L1 and L2, which is something students do not always understand. Moreover, expressions in languages usually depend on the context, which is a competence difficult to transfer to a machine such as GT. Therefore, the issues are, first, GT translations are sometimes incorrect or awkward, especially if the context of the sentence being translated is ambiguous, and secondly, students tend to trust such translations uncritically.

## **II. Interview**

### *2.1 Presentation of the interview and interviewees*

In order to investigate the use of translation as a tool in English teaching, I chose to conduct a semi-structured individual interview with five middle school English teachers to whom I will refer by name only in this paper. I chose my interviewees to be as varied as possible, in hope of getting as broad a range of answers as they are their working experiences. Out of the 5 middle school teachers I interviewed, two work in public schools and three in private schools. Moreover, their backgrounds and teaching careers also differ; Amanda is an English native speaker, she has a background in languages and taught English in France before moving to Italy and starting to teach English to Italian middle schoolers at a private school. Sonia has 25 years of experience teaching



English to foreign middle school-age kids in England before becoming a middle school teacher in Italy. Cristiana has a background in literature and has been teaching English at a private middle school for 18 years. Angela and Irene have been teaching at a public middle school for 25 and 10 years respectively. Furthermore, Sonia and Irene also have experience as translators, which made their interviews all the more interesting. Their translation background especially came into play in the section of questions about the use of digital translation tools, on which they could answer from both a translator and an educator's perspective.

## *2.2 Analysis of the interview questions:*

The questions asked in the interview can be grouped into three groups. To the first group belong questions targeted to investigate the use the interviewees made of translation in class. The second group contains questions aimed at finding out the interviewees' opinion on online translation tools, while the third group of questions inquired about the use of translation in writing exercises. Finally, the last question was meant to ascertain if English could be taught in middle schools without using translation.

### *2.2.1 How much do you make use of translation and Italian in general while teaching English?*

In order to research on the use of translation in teaching English in the context of middle schools, I thought appropriate to first ascertain how much my interviewed teachers made use of the Italian language in their lessons. At first, I posed the question in a generic manner; I asked which of the two languages, between the students' L1 (i.e. Italian) and L2 (i.e. English) they mainly used while teaching, and in general during their lessons. Then, I proceeded to break the question down into the different areas of English teaching and asked them to quantify, on a level from 1 to 5, how much they used Italian in each area, with a particular focus on if, when, how, and how often they made use of translations, either active or passive, in each area. For the record, in the scale I gave them, [1] corresponded to "only Italian", [2] was "more Italian than English", [3]

signified “both languages in equal measure”, [4] was “more English than Italian”, and lastly [5] meant “only English”.

When I posed the question in general, the answers were already varied, indicating just how different the methods of teaching my interviewees apply are. Cristiana and Sonia said they “mostly use English” in their lessons, and Amanda stated she almost only uses English. On the other hand, Irene said she uses both languages in equal measure, while Angela said that for her it changed with the classes: “in the first class I use Italian more than English, because they are beginners, so I have to use Italian. However, I increase my use of English more and more when I go to the second class and then to the third. In the third class I try to use as much English as possible.” Sonia also added that “it really depends on the children, because sometimes they're very, very advanced, and it's easier to use English rather than Italian or other languages. But sometimes you have to draw back a bit and ease them into the language, so the use of Italian was easier at a certain point”.

Going more into the specifics of the matter, I proceeded to break down the macro-subject of the English language taught in middle school into eight micro-subjects and areas of teaching, namely grammar, literature, culture, vocabulary, idiomatic and culture-bound expressions, delivering instructions and explaining classroom activities, giving feedback to the students, and checking the students’ listening and reading comprehension. I summarized the results of the interviews on these eight points in the table below.

Table 1: Summary of the answers to the first group of questions

<b>How much do you make use of translation and Italian in general:</b>	only Italian	more Italian than English	both	more English than Italian	only English
To explain English grammar rules		Cristiana, Irene	Angela, Sonia		Amanda
To teach English literature		Amanda	Irene	Sonia	Cristiana

To explain English culture				Angela, Irene	Amanda, Cristiana, Sonia
To teach new English vocabulary		Angela	Amanda, Cristiana, Irene	Sonia	
To explain idiomatic and culture-bound expressions		Sonia	Angela, Cristiana, Irene	Amanda	
To give instructions and explain classroom activities	Sonia	Irene			Angela, Amanda, Cristiana
To give feedback to students about their performance	Sonia	Cristiana, Irene		Amanda	Angela
To check the students' listening and reading comprehension			Angela, Irene	Cristiana	Amanda, Sonia

First, regarding the explanation of English grammar rules, two of the interviewees said they tended to use more Italian, two stated they used both, and only Amanda said she preferred explaining grammar wholly in English. “I generally like using the rules through text and reading comprehension. I think that they're the best way to learn the rules,” Amanda explained. Sonia too stated she likes to use more of a deductive method when teaching grammar: “I give them the English sentence and they have to work out the rule by themselves”, she explained. On the other hand, Cristiana stated that she “definitely uses more Italian than English to explain grammar rules”. She then expanded on the subject and explained that “when a student knows or can understand an element of the grammar in their mother tongue, it’s easier (for them) to understand the use of said element in English as well”. She also stressed the importance of translation when teaching grammar: “I use translations a lot, I make examples, sentences in English with the grammar point I want to teach, and then translate it so it’s easier for them to understand the differences between the languages and the English grammar structures [...] (because) even when they (the language structures) are completely different,

they still use the same grammar elements in the end” (Cristiana). Cristiana also stressed the importance of translating the grammar rules themselves into the students’ L1 so to make sure they truly understand them: “in some textbooks, grammar rules are explained in Italian, whereas in others they are explained only in English, and well, it’s not easy for the lower-level students to understand them, so sometimes it’s better to translate them also in Italian to make sure they understood”.

Second, the topic of teaching literature is where I got the most varied range of answers, to be more accurate, no two people among my interviewees gave me the same answer. Apart from Angela, who told me in her school they usually do not teach literature at all, focusing more on culture in general, Amanda said she believes that in order to teach literature you need to use translations, “because I think literature can be a little bit harder to understand if you're teaching something that has got a lot of idiomatic expressions. It won't work if you don't sort of translate it a little bit,” she explained. Irene’s answer rested in the middle, arguing that it all depends on the level of the students, therefore she usually uses both. Sonia, on the other hand, leaned more on the “more English” side of the scale: “If I do some comparisons between Italian literature and English literature, I do use Italian, but otherwise it's just English. I never translate literature texts.” she affirmed. She then expanded on that, explaining that, since the literature included in the middle school program is very little, “you can gauge the level of the text beforehand, so you don't have to translate word for word. [...] Obviously, you don't use the straightforward Shakespeare or Charlotte Bronte, you just use the abridged version, and at that point, you know that they can master the English on that text no problem”. Lastly, Cristiana seemed to agree with Sonia and stated that she only uses English to teach literature, since in middle school literature is mostly done in the third year, when the students “already have a level of English that allows them to understand the literature text.”

Third, on the topic of teaching English culture, all of my interviewees affirmed that they tend to mostly use English. Angela and Irene stated they mainly use English, with some Italian in between if the need arises, while Amanda, Cristiana, and Sonia maintained that they only use English to teach English culture. All of them agreed that translation is not really needed when teaching culture because “you can explain culture through situations. So you can sort of put it into very simplistic language that they understand and put it into a situation like a role play” (Amanda).

On the fourth point, verting on the method of teaching new English vocabulary, I got a very interesting answer, which seemed to be agreed upon by most of my interviewees. The use of translation when teaching new vocabulary in middle school, they told me, is almost inevitable. Angela, Amanda, and Cristiana explained that this is mostly due to the fact that there is not enough time in the short 3 hours of weekly lessons to “waste” on long-winded descriptions that could easily be over with just a couple words in Italian. In short, they tended to see translation as a shortcut to save time instead of a proper method of teaching. More of an inevitable last resort rather than a sought-after resource. However, Amanda, Cristiana and Irene also told me it is important to translate key words and the “important vocabulary that they (the students) are going to need” (Amanda). It is “to be sure everyone understands,” Cristiana explained. After this point, their opinion started to diverge again when we talked about teaching vocabulary through definitions and synonyms. Sonia strongly supported this method of teaching, stating that “you have to put a word into context to remember it. That's my first objective, to (make the students) learn the word, not by heart, but by getting the meaning out of the context”. On the other hand, Irene advocated for the use of translation: “I use translation because [...] At that level, A1 and A2, I want them to know exactly the meaning of vocabulary. I believe teaching through context at this level is not useful”. Cristiana's answer fell somewhere in-between the previous two; she argued that “translation is better if you have low level students, if the student's level is high, though, it's more efficient to use synonyms, give descriptions, or paraphrase,

because of course they can learn more vocabulary that way, but it's definitely slower".

In any case, the majority of my interviewees agreed that it is better to start by giving the students an English definition and some context when learning new vocabulary before moving to the translation.

The fifth point was about idiomatic and culture-bound expressions such as idioms and phrasal verbs. On this point, almost all my interviewees agreed that it is necessary to use translation, especially for idioms. Amanda was the only one who maintained idioms and phrasal verbs could be explained mostly using English, and only a bit of Italian where necessary, while the other four claimed that "you have to" use translations. "I tend to start with the Italian correspondent if there is one, and then go through the English," Sonia stated. She then made the example of *un altro paio di maniche*, which in English can be translated with *another kettle of fish*, and explained that "because the semantic area is completely different, you have to introduce both". Cristiana, Angela, and Irene were of the same mind, but they said they usually first give the students the English version and then they match it with the Italian correspondent.

On the sixth point, giving instructions and explaining classroom activities, I got two contrasting answers, and my interviewees split into two definite groups. The first group included Angela, Amanda, and Cristiana, who maintained they only use English to give instructions and explain activities. Angela elaborated on that, saying that if needed she uses gestures, miming or even does the action herself to avoid using Italian and "use as much English as possible". Cristiana added that "generally I use very basic language", so translating or using Italian is not necessary.

In contrast, Irene and Sonia claimed they mostly, if not only, use Italian when giving instructions in class, either "just to save time," as Sonia commented, or to "have a situation in which I can teach," if the class's level is too low, as Irene explained.

On the seventh point, giving feedback to the students about their performance, my interviewees mentioned that it largely depends on the level of the student they are talking to and on the importance of the feedback. “If it is feedback that has got a repercussion on the final mark that they will have on the school report, then I would tell them in Italian,” explained Sonia; whereas “if it is just feedback about something that they've done at home, for example, or a presentation, I will give it in English”.

Angela stated that she generally tries to use as much English as possible, using short expressions like “well done, good, very good, ok, I’m proud of you”. Amanda too said she mostly uses English as “there are only few students that might not understand, so I would translate it to them”. Last, Cristiana and Irene commented both on the importance of the feedback and the level of the students, explaining that “if I have to explain to them what mistakes they made while structuring sentences in English or clarify some of the points where they had difficulties while writing or in grammar, I use more Italian because I want to be sure they understand their mistakes. However [...] for high-level students, I have no problem giving them feedback in English” (Cristiana).

Last, on the eighth point, checking the student’s listening and reading comprehension, Sonia and Amanda stressed the importance of only using English. “It is much harder, but I think ultimately it will help them if they start doing it that way,” Amanda stated, then explaining that “when you go to live there, you don't get that opportunity to translate back into your language, it's actually a waste of time,” which is why she encourages her students to “find the words in the text in English to help them structure a sentence rather than doing a double job of going from one language to another and then back again”. Sonia was also of the same mind, stating that she asks questions to her students to check on their understanding, “and the questions are always in English”.

On the other hand, Angela, Cristiana, and Irene agreed that it is better to use both, especially with the lower-level students. “I always start with English and then, depending on the level of the student, I translate,” Angela told me. Then she added: “sometimes I tell them in English, and I ask one of my best students, or a volunteer, to translate for the other ones. And this is very nice for them

because they feel very proud when they do this". Cristiana's answer followed a similar logic; she said she chooses to use Italian only if she sees that her students truly did not understand at all, and "to be sure they at least understood the general meaning of what they listened to". In Irene's case, instead, she stated she translates only single words to help the students understand, but nothing more than that.

Eight main conclusions can be drawn from the analysis of the responses given by the interviewees. On the question of which, between L1 and L2, my interviewees used more while teaching English in middle school, and how translation played into that, I discovered that: first, while teaching English grammar, translation is often and mainly used to explain rules by translating example sentences and drawing comparison between L1 and L2 structures. Second, while teaching English literature, translation is sometimes used to translate the texts themselves, but it is not a common practice as most of my interviewees preferred using the texts as they are. Third all of my interviewees agreed that translation did not really play a role while teaching English culture since it can be better explained through situations in the L2 directly. Fourth, while teaching English vocabulary translation is "inevitable" and therefore sees the most use, both as a shortcut to get to the meaning quickly and as a last resort when the meaning of words fails to be conveyed otherwise. Fifth, translation plays, again, an important and indispensable role while explaining idiomatic and culture-bound expressions. In fact, most of my interviewees agreed that using direct translation, when possible, is the best solution in this case. Sixth, on giving instructions and explaining activities translation does not see much action since the teacher usually chooses to speak in one language or the other exclusively, without much back and forth. Seventh, on giving feedback, same as the point above, teachers choose to speak either L1 or L2 depending on the level of the student they are talking too and the importance of the feedback they are giving. Last, to check the students' reading and listening comprehension, most teachers agreed that translation is useful to make sure



the students really have a grasp on what is being said or read, and to give them a push if they are completely in the dark.

### *2.2.2 Do you encourage the use of online translation tools?*

#### *English-Italian dictionaries online and Google Translate*

After investigating on how much my interviewees use translation in their lessons, I went on with my interview and onto my second topic of concern: digital translation tools. My question this time was if they encouraged the use of English-Italian and Italian-English dictionaries online, both in class, for class activities and exams, and at home as an aid while studying and doing homework. Then, depending on their answer, I followed up with a second question; if they told me they did encourage the use of online dictionaries, my question was which, if any in particular, they found most accurate or user-friendly. If, conversely, the answer was negative, I asked what their students were allowed to use instead, and in which way it was better than online translation tools. Finally, I broached the topic of Google Translate and asked them what they thought about it as a translation tool, if their students were allowed to use it and what happened if they used it, with a particular focus on written compositions.

First, on the use of online bilingual dictionaries, three of my interviewees encourage their students to use them, especially at home, while two do not. Sonia, Irene, and Amanda told me they found online dictionaries useful and beneficial as an aid to the students, and when asked if they recommended any dictionary in particular, all three of them mentioned “Word Reference”. Sonia, who has a background in translation and interpreting, was particularly keen on using online resources. “I always say that if you want to find a translation, you have to do it digitally now,” she stated, and when I asked why she liked Word Reference, she explained: “I found, both as a translator interpreter and as a teacher, that (Word Reference) is the most reliable one.” Irene, the other one of my interviewees with a background in translation, agreed with her and told me she wants her students to use digital dictionaries, even downloading apps on

their phones or other devices, and other than “Word Reference”, she said she also found “Reverso Context” to be reliable and user-friendly. Finally, Amanda explained that she feels “Word Reference” is the simplest online dictionary to use since “if you want to translate one word, it will give you ten different ways that that word can be used”.

On the other hand, Angela and Cristiana did not view online translation tools in a positive light and both said they’d rather their students use the paper dictionaries. When asked why, Angela replied that “there is already a massive use of digital tools, so the less they use them, the better,” whereas Cristiana affirmed she believes “paper dictionaries have more accurate and rich translations, related to the different contexts”. Cristiana also pointed out that students are only allowed to use Italian-English paper dictionaries at the exam at the end of third year of middle school, therefore “they need to get used to searching on paper dictionaries, find words quickly, and choose the best translations for the context they need in that moment,” point on which Irene and Sonia agreed too. Nevertheless, Cristiana also brought up an aspect of online dictionaries that she reckoned was superior to their paper counterpart: “they are really useful for pronunciation”. The pronunciation feature that online dictionaries are equipped with is undoubtedly useful and distinctly more user-friendly than the pronunciation written with phonetic symbols on paper dictionaries. “At school we try teaching the phonetic symbols, and on paper dictionaries they have the pronunciation of the words, but hearing it pronounced is definitely more immediate and easier,” Cristiana commented.

After that, I shifted the conversation onto the topic of whole text translation tools, and I asked my interviewees about their opinion on Google Translate (GT) specifically. I then followed up with a second question, asking what they thought the advantages and/or disadvantages of using GT could be for the students.

As I already mentioned in the first chapter of this dissertation, I was well aware, before asking this question, of the terrible reputation that whole sentence translation tools, and GT in particular, being the most commonly known and readily available to the public, has and has always had. Especially in the school setting, where teachers tend to see it as a plague to avoid at all costs.

Nevertheless, I was curious to see if this view had shifted in the last few years, or if it had remained the same. The results of my inquiry confirmed that the view has not, indeed, shifted, as all of my interviewees rejected and even condemned the use of GT as a translation tool. Irene and Amanda just straight up declared they do not like GT. Irene explained she does not think the translations that come out of it are well-made at all, and added that: “If my students use GT I can immediately tell because the expressions that they put in the sentence or compositions are weird”. Whereas Amanda listed off various ways in which GT is used by the students and pointed out the disadvantages to each. “The problem with Google Translate is that if you one-word translate it does not give you all the answers. If you put in a big text, it will give you the answer of what it all means, but it means that you haven't learnt anything from the text. You haven't thought of what any of the words meant, you haven't seen the structure they're put in, [...] I don't think it helps,” she explained. Sonia stated that she, too, both as a translator and a teacher, does not like GT, “and especially in education, children cannot distinguish between what is correct and what is not correct. So they tend to look at GT as a certainty, and it's not. [...] It's just because they haven't got a critical view yet,” she explained. Angela had a less negative view as she admitted to using GT herself sometimes, but “only for single word translation,” whereas “it is absolutely forbidden (to her students) to use it as a whole sentence translator”. Lastly, Cristiana had by far the most positive view as she argued that “GT is an amazing tool for a person who needs to write in a different language, but in the learning process it becomes useful only if you use it correctly”. However, she also admitted to being reluctant to let the students use GT as “it's ok to check their work or for single-word translations, but (she is) always afraid about the use the students make of this tool”.

All things considered, my interviewees' opinion on GT is that the students would be better off avoiding it or severely restricting their usage of it. At least until they develop that “critical view” that will allow them to make a better use of such tools.

### *2.2.3 Do you encourage the use of translation as an aid in writing in English?*

While keeping on the topic of online translators, I shifted the focus onto writing as a skill in language learning and gave my interviewees a scenario where they gave their students a writing assignment and, as sometimes happens, a student wrote it all in Italian first to then translate the finished text into English. What I wanted to know was what my interviewees thought of such a method of writing, and if using translation in general while writing in the target language helped or hindered the writing process. Overall, most of my interviewees were not keen on the students relying too heavily on translation when writing in L2, and they gave me various reasons for that. Angela stated that, although “when they translate from Italian their essays tend to be longer”, the texts that come out feel “awkward”, “the sentences they produce [...] are not natural, there are even some false friends”. Amanda and Irene noted that the structure of the sentences in the two languages is just too different: “if you are doing it from French to Spanish or from Spanish to Italian, I don't think you're going to make that many mistakes [...], but English is so different. The structure of the sentence doesn't work the same” (Amanda). That being the case, relying too much on translation while writing only serves to create more work for the students and adds the more difficult job of reorganizing the sentence, which is “the difficult job of translators,” explained Amanda. Moreover, stressed Sonia, not only the structure of sentences but that of the texts themselves is completely different in Italian or English. “We (Italian speakers) jump back and forth while they (English speakers) have got a very strict structure to write both paragraphs and essays,” she explained, which is why she considers the method of “translation writing” completely unacceptable. Conversely, Cristiana found that, although somewhat flawed, the results produced through this method of writing are “not so bad” at middle school level. Especially in the first class, she stated she encourages this method by frequently giving the students exercises in active translation because she believes that “at the beginning of the learning process, the practice of active translation [...] can slowly lead the students to the automatic creation of sentences directly in English without the passage from L1.” Opposed to that, Angela, Irene, and Amanda stated they encourage their

students to make very short, simple sentences out of the words, expressions, and grammatical structures they learnt, and then slowly they can start linking them together and building a text.

So, in conclusion, translation in writing may be perceived as an undesirable tool by most teachers in middle schools, who would rather their students made use of the knowledge they have to create simple structures. But it could also benefit the learning process if used it to learn how to make those simple structures through comparing the translations.

*2.2.3 Do you believe that your students, at their current level, would be able to understand and learn English without using translation or the aid of their L1 (Italian) at all?*

The last question asked interviewees if they believed their students, at their current levels, would be able to learn English without using translation or the use of their L1 at all. The answers could be mostly summarized with “it is unrealistic”. First of all, because the level of the students that get in from different elementary schools is too varied, as Amanda and Cristiana mentioned. “To get them to do it without having to translate at all would be almost too big a hurdle,” Amanda commented. Sometimes, she said, it is better to give the students the translation “just to make them feel comfortable, [...] because you don't want to put them off the language”. Cristiana added that “if you want to teach using 100% English then you probably need students who already have a basic understanding of English, maybe A2 or A2+ level,” but as the gap between the levels is big, “using some Italian is unavoidable”. Additionally, Sonia pointed out that creating an English-only environment in a room full of 11-year-olds is akin to a fool's errand: “it's almost impossible to make them speak English from the very first moment you enter the class until the last minute you leave the class”. And even if you succeeded in doing that, the students then get out of class and revert back to Italian, reducing the impact of the full language immersion. Angela added that the time dedicated to English in middle school is too little to completely discard translation, which makes the learning process go faster. Irene was the only one who gave me a definitive negative answer, stating

that at A1 level the students “need translation” as it is “such an important tool for them to understand and learn new words”.

In conclusion, the environment in middle school does not allow the teachers to discard the use of translation completely, regardless of their feelings on the matter, and the students who sometimes lack even the basics, are not ready to be deprived of their safety net at such an early stage of the language learning process.

### **Notes**

All interviewees allowed me to use their name in this thesis, which is why I did not use pseudonyms.

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