

USE OF NATIVE LANGUAGE IN LEARNING ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES

Irena Darginavičienė, Violeta Navickienė

Klaipėdos universitetas

Abstract

Learning / teaching languages is vital in higher education. There are two main approaches to language teaching, the monolingual and the bilingual. This article aims at examining students' attitudes to using the mother tongue in learning English for Specific Purposes and analyzing their self-assessments of translating from native language (L1) into English (L2) and vice versa. The respondents in this study are the 1st and 2nd year students of two specializations, Healthcare and Philology at Klaipėda University, and they will need English for their future profession. The analysis of their responses has revealed that all learners need a support of their mother tongue in English classes. The reliability and validity of the findings were checked by applying the SPSS software (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) and the obtained statistical data imply that conclusions can be extended beyond the relatively small amounts of the respondents' samples of the current research.

KEY WORDS: use of native language, learning English for Specific Purposes, self-assessment of translation skills, statistical treatment of survey data.

Anotacija

Užsienio kalbų mokymas / mokymasis yra ypač svarbus aukštojoje mokykloje. Pastaruoju metu vyrauja du pagrindiniai požiūriai – vienkalbis ir dvikalbis. Pagyvėjęs gimtosios kalbos taikymo susidomėjimas mokant profesinės kalbos yra susijęs su poreikiu gerinti užsienio kalbų vartosenos tikslumą, laisvumą bei lankstumą. Šiame straipsnyje analizuojami studentų požiūriai į gimtosios kalbos naudingumą besimokant anglų profesinės kalbos bei jų gebėjimai versti specialybės tekstus iš anglų kalbos ir į anglų kalbą. Tyrimuose dalyvavo 1 ir 2 kursų dviejų skirtingų specializacijų studentai, studijuojantys Klaipėdos universitete. Apklausų rezultatai parodė, kad visi respondentai pritaria gimtosios kalbos vartojimui anglų kalbos pratybose. Atsakymai statistiškai apdoroti naudojant SPSS (*Statistical Package for the Social Sciences*) programinę įrangą.

PAGRINDINIAI ŽODŽIAI: gimtosios kalbos vartoseną, anglų specialybės kalba, vertimo įgūdžių analizė, statistinis skaičiavimas.

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Introduction

The contemporary learning / teaching of languages is based on the communicative method which highlights the teaching English through English (Willis, 1981). However, the idea of abandoning the native language is too stressful to many learners, who need a sense of security in the experience of learning a foreign language. In the past, the prevalence of grammar-translation method led to the extraordinary phenomenon: students were unable to speak fluently after having studied the language for a long time. For this reason, translation was defined as un-

communicative, boring, pointless, difficult and irrelevant (Duff, 1994). A revival of interest to using a native tongue in the English classroom is caused by the necessity to improve language accuracy, fluency and flexibility. One reason for using the mother tongue in class is that learners are linguistically incapable of activating vocabulary. Another reason is that translation is a natural thing to do in language learning. Moreover, translation can serve as a tool for improving language skills.

1. Literature background

The interest to using the first language L1 for the acquisition of the second language L2 has persisted in linguistics for a long time with its ups and downs for various reasons. In this context, it is necessary to distinguish between the teaching of translation as a vocational skill and the use of translation in the teaching situation as an aid to language learning. The need for some translation in language teaching / learning is usually supported by the non-native teachers. Native teachers of English argue that foreign language learning needs as much exposure to the L2 as possible during classroom time, and any usage of the mother tongue or translation is a waste of time. However, translation has been an important part of English language teaching for a long time, but it has been abandoned since communicative methodologies became dominant. Communicative approaches to language learning in the 20th century considered the use of the native language as undesirable. Interestingly, although translation was out of favor with English language practitioners, “it has rather stubbornly refused to die in the teaching of languages other than English” (Cook, 2007, p. 7). It was claimed that a present interest to using a mother tongue in the English classroom was due to the necessity to improve language accuracy and fluency (Ross, 2000). In other words, the use of mother tongue and translation can serve as a tool for improving language skills.

Some practitioners believed that students' first language (L1) should not be allowed in a second language classroom due to the L1 interference. In the past, a learners' mother tongue was rejected because of linguistic transfer of structures and vocabulary from the native language (Kroll, 1994). There appears a widespread assumption that language transfer is an important characteristic of second language acquisition and this deficiency may be developmental. Cross-linguistic similarities and differences between the L1 and the L2 can produce positive transfer or negative transfer such as underproduction, overproduction, production errors, and misinterpretation (Odlin, 1996). Both negative and positive transfer between the L1 and the L2 is important for development of the complex system of the learners' second language.

According to J. Harmer (2001), students use their mother tongue in class if they are linguistically incapable of activating vocabulary for a chosen task. Another reason is that translation is a natural thing to do in language learning, and code-switching between languages is regarded as natural development in learning another language.

A. Bonyadi (2003) claims that it is inevitable for language learners to use their native language L1 as a resource; they need to be able to relate lexis and structures of target language into their equivalents in their mother tongue; moreover, translation makes the students develop their reading comprehension ability as it is a conscious process of learning.

Regarding the use of the L1 in the L2 classroom, it is important to find out how students themselves feel about it. Schweers (1999), in a report of the outcomes of his research on the use of the mother tongue in English classes, concludes that a second language can be learned through raising awareness to the similarities and differences between the L1 and L2. His research into the issue of the L1 use in the L2 classes shows that 89 % of the participants felt that mother tongue had to be used in their English classes. S. Deller (2003) supports the same ideas by stating that the mother tongue is not only a resource to notice differences and similarities between the two languages, but also it lets learners 1) develop and produce their own materials, including their own tests; 2) encourage spontaneity and fluency; 3) have a beneficial effect on group dynamics and receive ongoing and meaningful feedback from learners. V. Janulevičienė and G. Kavaliauskienė (2002) emphasized the necessity of translation as the fifth skill in teaching ESP. The study of grammar-translation method aiming to achieve a communicative goal and to improve learners' performance confirms the idea (Kim, 2011). Studies into use of the L1 in the ESP classes by M. Xhemali (2013) report that 75 of 150 participants believe that the L1 must be used in English class rooms, and about 67 % of students feel it can be used in translating the unknown and difficult words.

Major objections to using translation in language teaching were summarized (Kaye, 2009) as follows. First, translation does not help students develop communication skills. Second, it encourages them to use the L1 instead of the L2. Third, translation activities may be suitable for students who prefer analytical or verbal-linguistic learning strategies. Finally, translation is a difficult skill, which is not always rewarding. On the other hand, the benefits of translation activities include practice of all language skills, i.e. reading, writing, speaking and listening. In terms of communicative competence, it helps to master accuracy, clarity and flexibility. It is well known that translation is a real-life, natural activity which many learners use on a daily basis either formally or informally. Translation is a usual strategy used by many learners even if teachers do not encourage it.

Over 30 years ago, teachers and students started to use translation to teach / learn English language (Duff, 1994). Translation is often referred to as the fifth language skill alongside the other four basic skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. It holds a special importance at an intermediate and advanced level: translations from the L1 to the L2 and from the L2 to the L1 are recognized as the most important social skills since they promote communication and understanding between strangers (Ross, 2000). If students are aware of the differences between languages, language transfer and intervention from their own language are likely to be reduced.

Some linguists stated that native language use in the English classroom can make students think that words and structures in English have a L1 correspondence, which normally does not exist. Therefore, raising students' consciousness of the non-parallel nature of language allows learners to think comparatively (Atkinson, 1993). The important question is how to reach a balance of the L1 usage in the learning process. It was suggested that four factors should be considered, namely, the students' previous experience, their level, the stage of the course, and the stage of the individual lesson.

There is an opinion (Mattioli, 2004) that eliminating or limiting the native language does not guarantee better acquisition. Translation as a teaching tool needs to take into account grammar, syntax and other aspects of language. However good the students are at understanding authentic materials, some of them keep mentally translating from L2 into L1 and vice versa. This fact makes teachers of English consider the importance of translation for learning purposes. The research by G. Kavaliauskienė and L. Kaminskienė (2007) also confirmed this idea. Moreover, some practitioners (Mahmoud, 2006) believe that it is highly probable that L2 learners will always think most often in their L1, even at the advanced level.

According to B. Naimushin (2002, p. 49), "when learners realize there will always be words and expressions they do not know, but this cannot be an obstacle to successful communication, and that translation is not about word-by-word rendering of the original message in the target language but is communication-oriented".

G. Cook (2010) claims that for most contemporary language learners, translation should be a major aim and means of language learning, and a major measure of success. He believes that "translation has been (grudgingly) accepted as a useful tool for decades, even if it went against recent theories of language learning; translation is inevitable. People are L1-based creatures, but this is also a potential bridge to L2, 3 or 4, and translation can be stimulating, fun and enriching" (Cook, 2010, p. 15).

Recently published review (Crowlly, 2014) of L2 learning strategies using L1 acquisition methods analyzes the application of ostensive-referential communica-

tion, inter-subjectivity, joint attention and activity to learning by involving natural L1 learning mechanisms. The idea of using L1 in a ‘functional-translation method’ is particularly relevant to the current research as it demonstrates how L1 can support L2 learning.

The debate over the use of L1 in foreign language teaching has not been settled yet. On the one hand, there are teachers who reject the use of L1 or fail to recognize any significant potential in it. On the other hand, there are those who massively overuse it. It is important to use the L2 as the language of instruction when possible and switching to the mother tongue when it is really necessary. Whatever the teachers’ attitudes to the L1 appropriateness in English classes are, they must take into consideration the needs of their learners.

This paper aims at examining perceptions of the so called Generation Y, which was described by Reilly (2012), on the use of translation in ESP classes in various linguistic situations. These students were born into a world of the Information Technology, they prefer to multitask and are technologically advanced, and they think and behave differently from the members of previous generations.

2. Respondents and methods

The respondents were the students specializing in Healthcare and Philology at Klaipeda University and studying English for Specific Purposes (ESP). There were two samples (37 students) of the 1st year and two samples (23 students) of the 2nd year respondents of both specializations. Their level of English proficiency was assessed by administering the Oxford Placement Test, and it was either intermediate or pre-intermediate. The instruction time in L2 environment was 4 hours per week for 1 semester, which amounted to 64 hours of English teaching.

The design of the administered questionnaire conforms to the accepted standards (Dörnyei, 2010). In this study, the same questionnaire was administered as used by other researchers (Kavaliauskienė, Kaminskienė, 2007):

Questionnaire:

- 1) It is easy for me to translate from English into my native language:
1 – strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 – not sure, 4 – agree, 5 – strongly agree;
- 2) It is easy for me to translate from my native language into English:
1 – strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 – not sure, 4 – agree, 5 – strongly agree;
- 3) In English classes, I occasionally prefer to use my mother tongue:
1 – strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 – not sure, 4 – agree, 5 – strongly agree;
- 4) In writing activities, I always translate ideas from my mother tongue into English:
1 – strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 – not sure, 4 – agree, 5 – strongly agree;

5) In reading professional texts, I often use a bilingual dictionary to translate unknown words:

1 – strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 – not sure, 4 – agree, 5 – strongly agree;

6) In listening activities, I occasionally have to translate mentally what I hear:

1 – strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 – not sure, 4 – agree, 5 – strongly agree;

7) In speaking activities, I mentally translate what I want to say:

1 – strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 – not sure, 4 – agree, 5 – strongly agree.

Traditionally, the responses were rated on a 5-point Likert's scale from 1 to 5: strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

3. Results and discussion

This section reports the findings of the survey (Appendix) and analyzes the key points that emerged. For the sake of clarity in the further data display, the usual approach is applied: the positive responses, i.e. (4) agree and (5) strongly agree, and negative responses, i.e. (1) strongly disagree and (2) disagree, are added up. The findings are presented in percentage, and neutral responses are automatically accounted for in computing the Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations between the responses.

The survey statements are reproduced below for simplifying the understanding of graphical information in the following charts:

- It is easy for me to translate from English (L2) into my native language (L1).
- It is easy for me to translate from my native language (L1) into English (L2).
- In English classes, I occasionally prefer to use my mother tongue.
- In writing activities, I always translate ideas from my mother tongue into English.
- In reading professional texts, I often use a bilingual dictionary to translate unknown words.
- In listening activities, I occasionally have to translate mentally what I hear.
- In speaking activities, I mentally translate what I want to say.

The frequencies of positive responses of the 1st year students in percentage versus the survey statements (1 to 7) are shown in Chart 1. The 1st cylinders (blue) represent the responses by the students of Healthcare specialization, and the 2nd cylinders (red) – by the students of Philology specialization.

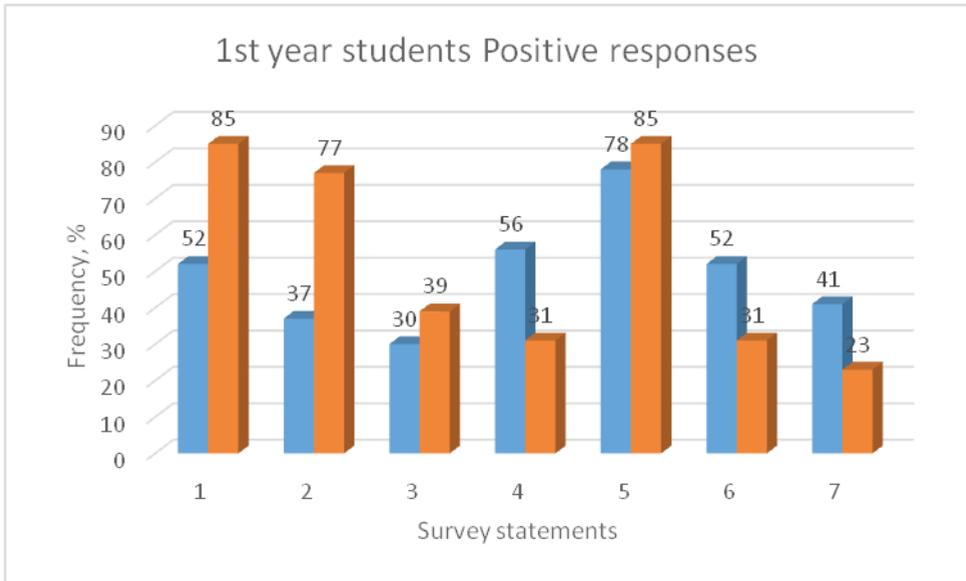


Chart 1. The frequencies of positive responses on the use of the mother tongue in different class activities by the 1st year students. The 1st cylinders (blue) show the students' responses of the Healthcare specialization; the 2nd cylinders (red) – by the students of Philology

According to Chart 1, the 1st year students face difficulties in:

- translation from L2 (1st statement, 52 %) and from L1 (2nd statement, 37 %) – Healthcare specialization;
- class activities (3rd statement, 30 %) – Healthcare specialization;
- writing (4th statement, 31 %), listening (6th statement, 31 %), speaking (7th statement, 23 %) – Philology specialization.

Chart 2 displays the negative responses of the same groups.

Both Charts 1 and 2 clearly demonstrate that respondents are quite proficient in English skills, but the frequencies of responses clearly indicate that there are certain differences between the specializations. In order to estimate the importance of diversity of responses, the statistical treatment that has been employed for the scientific analysis of the data will be presented below.

The frequencies of positive responses of the 2nd year students in percentage versus the survey statements (1 to 7) are shown in Chart 3. Similarly as in the previous Charts, the 1st cylinders (blue) represent the responses by the students of Healthcare specialization, the 2nd cylinders (red) – by the students of Philology.

The frequencies of negative responses of the 2nd year students in percentage versus the survey statements (1 to 7) are shown in Chart 4. The 1st cylinders (blue) represent the responses by the students of Healthcare specialization, the 2nd cylinders (red) – by the students of Philology specialization.

It is important to highlight that the 2nd year students have the same difficulties as the 1st year students, i.e. low responses to statement 3 (20 % vs. 36 %), 4 (30 % vs. 36 %), 6 (50 % vs. 15 %), and 7 (40 % vs. 36 %).

From the comparison of Chart 1 with Chart 3, it is obvious that the 2nd year students are more advanced in all language skills, and the differences between specializations are less pronounced. The major problems for the students of both specializations are knowledge of ESP vocabulary (statement 3) and writing skills (statement 4).

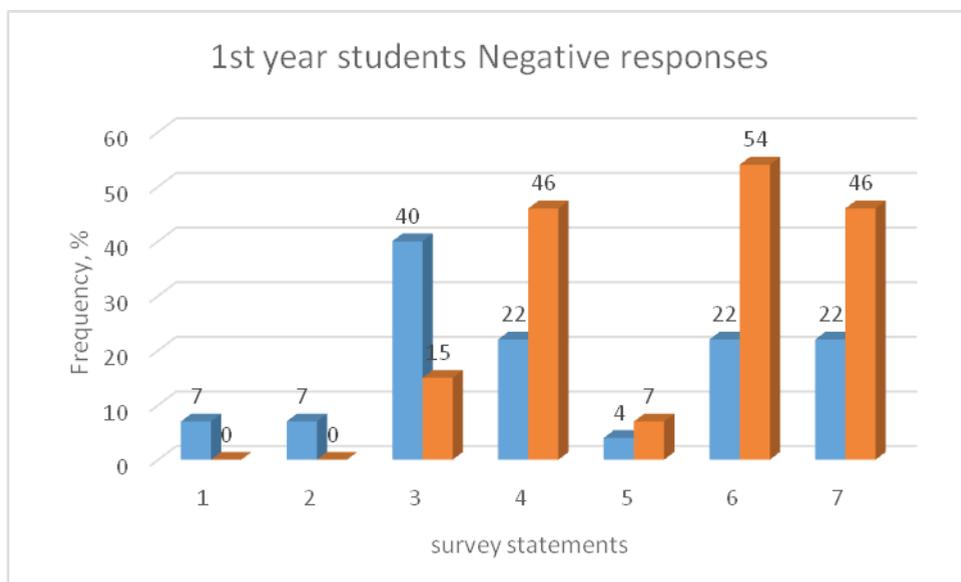


Chart 2. The frequencies of negative responses on the use of the mother tongue in different class activities by the 1st year students. The 1st cylinders (blue) show the students' responses of the Healthcare specialization; the 2nd cylinders (red) – by the students of Philology specialization

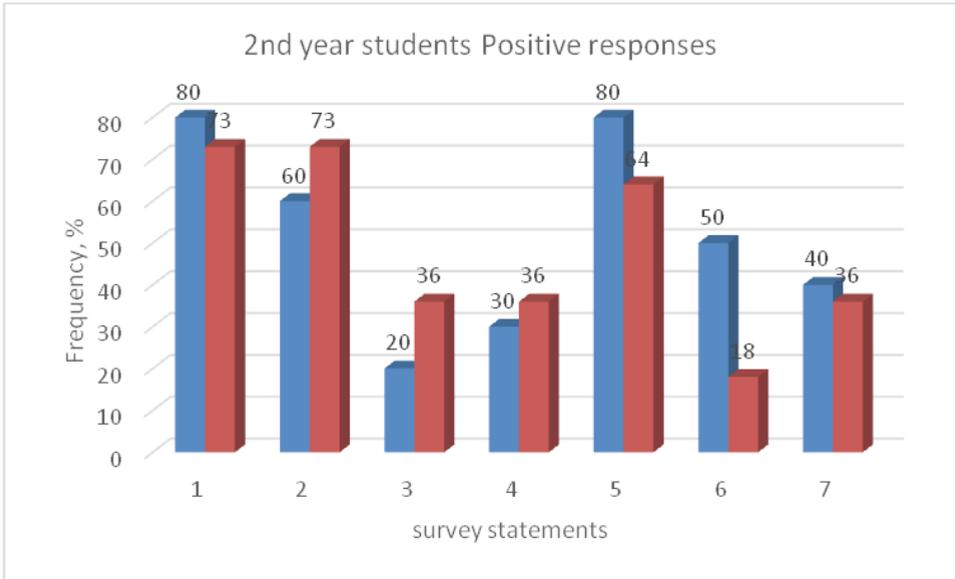


Chart 3. The frequencies of positive responses on the use of native language in different class activities by the 2nd year students. The 1st cylinders (blue) show the students' responses of the Healthcare specialization; the 2nd cylinders (red) by the students of Philology specialization

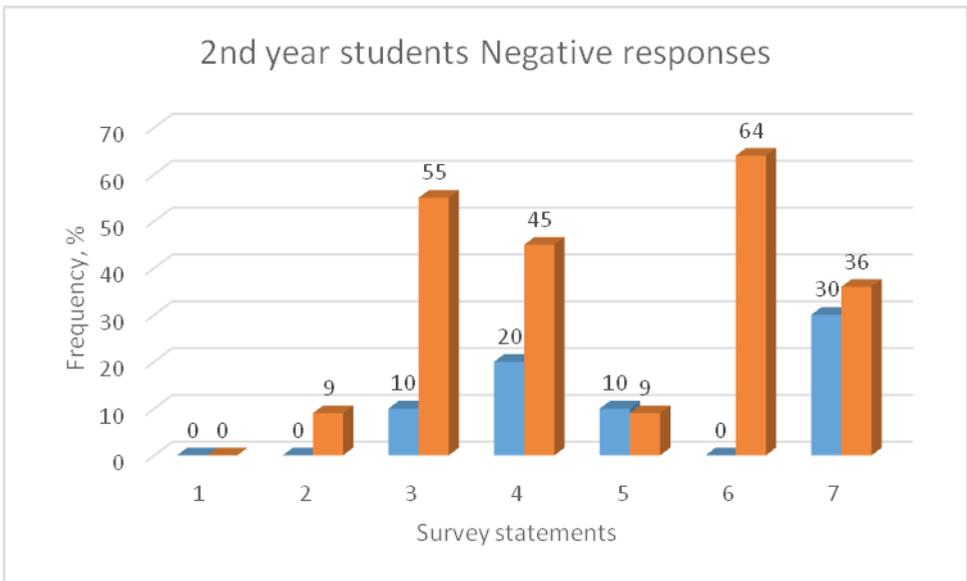


Chart 4. The frequencies of negative responses on the use of native language in different class activities by the 2nd year students. The 1st cylinders (blue) show the students' responses of the Healthcare specialization; the 2nd cylinders (red) – by the students of Philology specialization

It should be emphasized that a total sum of positive and negative responses for each statement is not equal to 100 %, because the neutral responses are not included in the Charts. However, the neutral responses are accounted for in the SPSS computations.

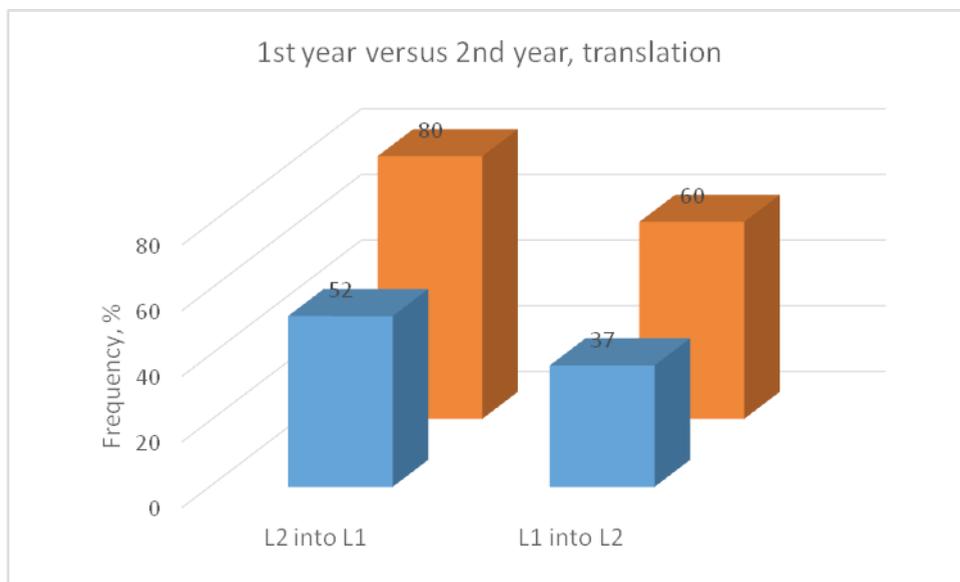


Chart 5. Comparison of translation skills of the 1st and 2nd year students: Healthcare specialization. Blue columns present the responses of the 1st year students, red columns – of the 2nd year students

In higher education, the most important part of language acquisition is the ability to translate professional materials from L1 into L2 and vice versa. Chart 5 and Chart 6 display the comparison of the 1st year and 2nd year students' abilities to translate ESP texts. The data in Chart 5 refer to the Healthcare specialization, and the data in Chart 6 – to the Philology specialization.

As it can be seen in Charts 5 and 6, translation aptitudes from English into native language, which are displayed by the first sets in both charts, differ. The second sets in both charts show the translation abilities from L1 into L2.

In Chart 5, which shows the findings for the Healthcare specialization, translation skills from L2 into L1 are at 52 % for the 1st year students and at 80% for the 2nd year students, respectively. The level of translation skills from the native language L1 into English L2 increases, too, from 37 % to 50 %, respectively.

In Chart 6 the first set, which shows the translation aptitudes from L2 into L1 of Philology students, is opposite to the data in Chart 5. Namely, the data are higher for the 1st year students (85 %) and lower for the 2nd year students (77 %), while

translation abilities from L1 into L2 are the same and estimated at 73 %. However, it is just the trend observed in the statistics of skill development – the findings do not refer to the same students, therefore, there is no sense in drawing conclusions on students becoming better or worse at translating.

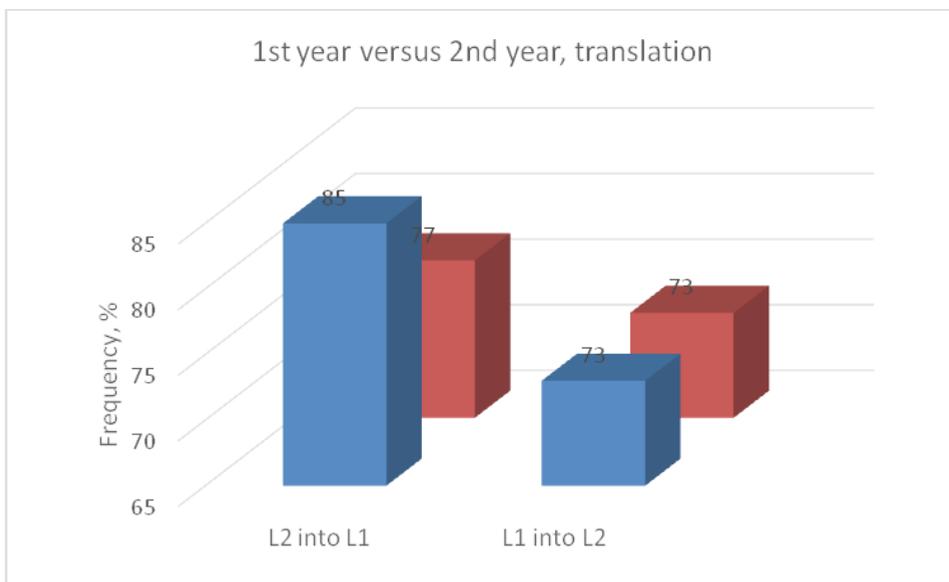


Chart 6. Comparison of translation skills of the 1st and 2nd year students: Philology specialization. Blue columns present the responses of the 1st year students, red columns – of the 2nd year students

The obtained results have been processed statistically by a means of Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). First, the reliability of collected data was evaluated by computing Cronbach's Alpha coefficients. According to Z. Dörnyei (2010), results are reliable if the value of Cronbach's Alpha coefficient is at least 0.60. Here, the values of Cronbach's Alpha coefficients have been equal to 0.92 for the responses of Healthcare students and 0.89 for the responses of the Philology students, respectively, which proves that obtained data are reliable. The Means and Standard Deviations have also been computed, but omitted for the sake of brevity.

The first step in correlation analysis is to figure out the type of scales to use. It is well known that three types of scales may be used in language studies: rank-ordered, continuous, and categorized scales. In the current research, the findings are organized by Likert's order, therefore the Spearman's type of correlation is appropriate, as it analyzes two sets of rank-ordered data.

The Spearman's Correlation Coefficients have been computed. The results are presented in Table 1 and Table 2. Table 1 displays Spearman's Correlation Coeffi-

cients computed for the 1st year students of both specializations and each statement of the survey, and Table 2 – for the 2nd year students.

Table 1. Spearman’s Correlation Coefficients and Sig. (2-tailed) levels for 2 samples of the 1st year students of both specializations.

The Gist of Survey Statements	Spearman’s Correlation Coefficient	Sig. (2-tailed)	Significance level
1. Easy to translate from L2 into L1	.719**	.006	** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)
2. Easy to translate from L1 into L2	.702**	.008	** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)
3. Prefer to use L1 in class	.866*	.000	** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)
4. In writing need L1 to formulate ideas	.702**	.008	** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)
5. In reading need dictionary to understand	.681*	.010	* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)
6. In listening mentally translate	.816**	.001	** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)
7. In speaking mentally translate	.934**	.000	** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 2. Spearman’s Correlation Coefficients and Sig. (2-tailed) levels for 2 samples of the 2nd year students’ responses of both specializations

The Gist of Survey Statements	Spearman’s Correlation Coefficient	Sig. (2-tailed)	Significance level
1. Easy to translate from L2 into L1	.697*	.025	* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)
2. Easy to translate from L1 into L2	.764*	.010	* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)
3. Prefer to use L1 in class	.802**	.005	** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)
4. In writing need L1 to formulate ideas	.900**	.000	** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)
5. In reading need dictionary to understand	.713*	.021	* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)
6. In listening mentally translate	.767**	.010	** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)
7. In speaking mentally translate	.895**	.000	** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Both Tables, 1 and 2, clearly demonstrate that there are very good correlations (columns 2) between the samples of the 1st year and the 2nd year students' responses. The least value of Spearman's Correlation Coefficient is 0.702 (Table 1, statement 2) and the highest value is 0.934 (Table 1, statement 7). The data in Table 2 are slightly different: the lowest value of Correlation Coefficient is 0.697, and the highest value is 0.900. It means that there are valid linear relationships between the responses in all survey statements. However, the most important parameter in the SPSS computations is the Sig. (2-tailed) which is shown in column 3. Column 4 of both Tables presents the conclusions on each correlation. In other words, the results are significant either at the probability of 95 %, i.e. 0.05 level, or 99 %, i.e. 0.01 level.

Table 3. Spearman's Correlation Coefficients and Sig. (2-tailed) levels for the 1st versus the 2nd year students' responses.

The Gist of Survey Statements	Spearman's Correlation Coefficient	Sig. (2-tailed)	Significance level
1. Easy to translate from L2 into L1	.937**	.000	** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)
2. Easy to translate from L1 into L2	.746**	.008	** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)
3. Prefer to use L1 in class	.553	.078	No Correlation is significant
4. In writing need L1	.889**	.000	** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)
5. In reading need dictionary	.776**	.005	** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)
6. In listening mental translation	.809**	.003	** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)
7. In speaking mental translation	.871**	.000	** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

In Table 3, the computed Spearman's Correlation Coefficients and Sig. (2-tailed) levels for the 1st versus the 2nd year students' responses are displayed. There are very good correlations for all statements except the 3rd statement, i.e. the preferences of using native language in English classes. This result is hard to explain – it is just the fact that has been obtained. However, as far as other statements are concerned, the obtained findings are significant at the probability of 99 % (Sig. (2-tailed) level of 0.01), and at high values of Spearman's Correlation Coefficients: the lowest is 0.746 and the highest is 0.937. It allows concluding that the findings may be extended beyond the range of rather small samples of respondents in this research.

Conclusions

The following conclusions have been drawn. First, the current respondents, similarly as previous streams of learners described by other researchers, rely on their mother tongue in learning English for Specific Purposes. Second, the amount of the native language that students need depends on their proficiency in General English, chosen specialization and linguistic activities. Third, the processing of the responses on the use of mother tongue by a means of SPSS software showed that the obtained data are statistically significant. Fourth, the respondents' self-assessments of translation abilities are also statistically significant, i.e. they are not due to chance. Finally, respondents are realistic about their abilities to translate professional materials: students are more capable of translating from English into their native language than vice versa, which is also consistent with the data obtained by other researchers.

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